



angles

WOMEN WORKING IN FILM & VIDEO

VOLUME 4, NUMBERS 2 & 3
SPECIAL COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE
1991-2003

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COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE 1991-2003

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Angles is committed to bringing readers information and news about the diverse body of work created by women from all ethnic, cultural, racial and socio/economic backgrounds.

A voluptuous body of work...

ANGLES RETROSPECTIVE

The editors

ANGLES WAS FOUNDED in the spring of 1991. It evolved out of talks with film and video makers, curators, festival organizers and writers who had gathered at the Women in the Director's Chair Film & Video Festival. Although women produced important work in alternative and independent media, they were, and are still, under-represented in the mainstream press. With the help of Gretchen Elsner-Sommer and Dan Sargeant I launched *Angles* to recognize and document the work being done by women from all ethnic, cultural and socio/economic backgrounds. Our mission was to provide space for discussion of films and videos by women and to help build an information network about the work.

In the last 12 years, we've covered women in media at all levels from producing to directing to exhibiting and distributing to programming to camera and sound work.

One of our first interviews was with Barbara Trent about the making of *The Panama Deception*, which later won an Academy Award. Mira Nair, Camille Billops, Shrikiana Aina, Ingrid Sinclair, Clara Law, Julie Dash, Cauleen Smith, Maggie Greenwald, Stacy Cochran, Christine Choy, Ellen Bruno and Allie Light are among the women who appeared on our pages. We've featured women from Latin America, China, India, Russia, Poland, Mexico, Africa and Cuba.

In our commemorative issue, we've compiled a representative collection of interviews that have been published in *Angles*.

From the beginning *Angles* has been a volunteer endeavor. We have been able to publish the magazine and show films over the years through the generosity of editors, writers, filmmakers, businesswomen, artists and organizers, who volunteered their time and talents to keep the magazine going. Because of financial and personal concerns we are no longer able to publish after this issue.

We encourage you to keep making films, writing about them and showing them in classrooms, theaters and community centers.

Heartfelt thanks goes to all who have helped with the magazine—Jennifer Wilson for her editorial contributions to this issue, and especially to board members Dan Sargeant for his dedication to *Angles* from the beginning and for his impeccable editing and Gretchen Elsner-Sommer for her support, ideas and editorial contributions.

The most rewarding aspect of publishing the magazine has been the opportunity to see the wide range of work by women and to learn through their work about the lives of women all over the world. We've seen a tremendous amount of growth in the numbers and types of films by women. We are proud to have had a small part in bringing that work to a wider audience.

Elfrieda N. Abbe



Elfrieda Abbe was the arts and entertainment editor and film critic for *The Milwaukee Sentinel* when she began publishing *Angles*. Her interest in women's issues led to writing about women filmmakers and their role in the development of the film industry. Combining 20 years experience writing and editing and her love of film, she left the newspaper in 1993 to devote more time to *Angles*. "I was fortunate to see work by women from all over the world and wanted to help bring it to a wider audience," she says. During that time she also taught courses about women filmmakers at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design and helped organize screenings of women's work. In addition to publishing *Angles*, she was a freelance writer and film critic and became publications editor for the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee College of Letters and Science. She lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and is now editor of *The Writer* magazine. Contact: eabbe@wi.rr.com



Gretchen Elsner-Sommer's interest in women's media began with her graduate studies in the late 1970s at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, where she received a master's degree in film. Through the 1980s, she worked in various aspects of distribution and exhibition of women's work. She helped edit *Jumpcut*; wrote film criticism for *Off Our Backs* and started a small film distribution company, Foreign Images. Later, as program director of Women in the Director's Chair (WIDC), she worked with others to build an annual festival, to start a yearly tour of festival work and to increase the number of venues for work by independent women film and video makers. In this capacity, she also served on funding panels that supported independent media. "My association with *Angles* was a natural outcome of my respect for and involvement with women's media," she says. She now lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where her writing and research continue to focus on women's lives. Contact: elsnersom@ameritech.net



Dan Sargeant has been one of the editors and a supporter of *Angles* since its inception. He applied his copy editing skills to every issue and helped with many *Angles* events. A film aficionado, he has long been a supporter of alternative media. Dan is a lawyer and lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



Jennifer Wilson is a writer and independent producer who has worked on everything from corporate training videos to feature films. She is a founding member of the Milwaukee Independent Film Society. Jennifer says she was drawn to volunteer for *Angles* after interviewing Elfrieda for an article. Jennifer is currently at work on a collection of short stories and, of course, a script or two. She lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Contact: jennifer@bartolifilm.com

A Powerful Thang

Developing a black aesthetic in film

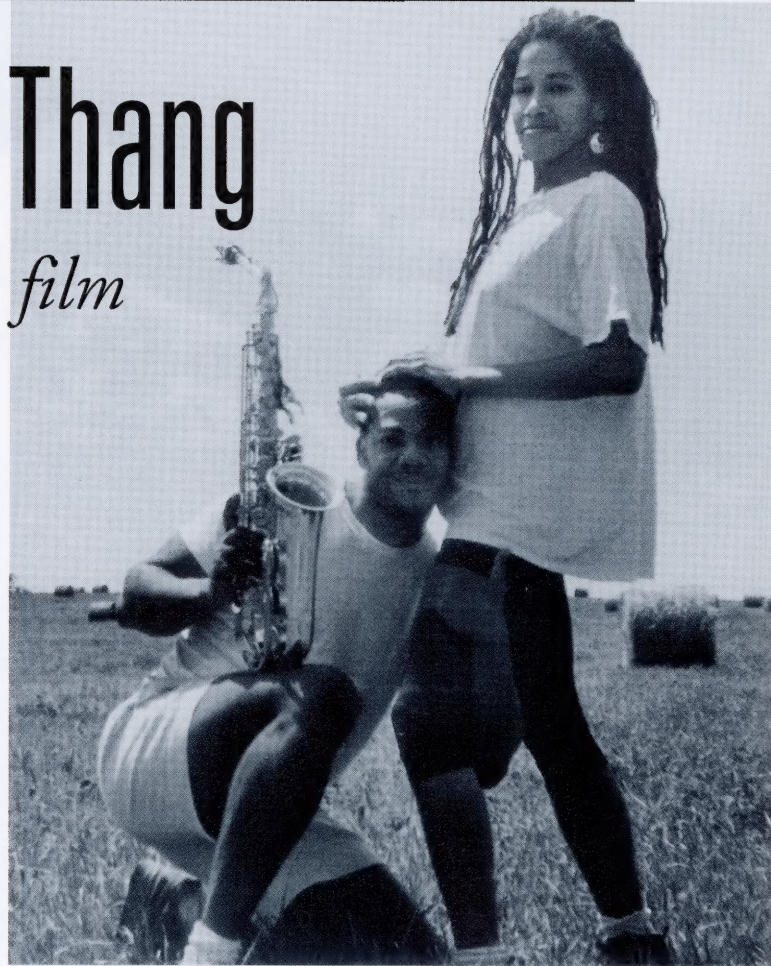
BY ANN FILEMYR

A POWERFUL THANG, WRITTEN, DIRECTED and produced by Zeinabu irene Davis, is an experimental narrative film about an African-American couple and their search for intimacy and friendship. Davis' first feature film revolves around two main characters, Yasmine Allen (Asma Feyijinmi) and her love interest Craig Watkins (John Jelks). Yasmine is a single mother of two-year-old Akin and works as a freelance writer and editor. Craig is a high school music teacher and saxophone player. They have been dating for a month and are slowly falling in love. The trouble is that Yasmine desperately wants to end her self-imposed two-year celibacy. Craig, however, likes to take things slowly and is therefore not interested in rushing the physical level of their relationship. The film highlights the beauty and simplicity of a day in the lives of African-American people in southwestern Ohio, covering ordinary events in each character's day. Yasmine's activities involve writing and caring for Akin, attending dance rehearsal and having a heartfelt talk concerning safe sex with her father, the jazz-loving Pop Allen (James S. Davis). Craig wakes up and practices the scales on his saxophone, conducts band practice, gets a haircut and receives sage advice from his mother, and herbalist, Mama Joyce (Barbara-O). In a gentle, positive way, the film shows that friendship, commitment and responsibility should always happen before intimacy is considered.

Part of the process of creating *A Powerful Thang* was pairing skilled film technicians from Ohio and Los Angeles with students from Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Each professional on the film crew worked with students to strengthen the skills they had learned in the classroom. Each student was given significant creative responsibility in key production positions.

Also working on the film were Doris-Owanda Johnson, who wrote the original story; S. Torriano Berry, cinematographer; Casi Pacilio, editor; and Christina Springer, assistant producer and art director. Musical consultants were Steve Schwerner, Bob Reamer and Bill Wilson.

I interviewed Zeinabu irene Davis three nights before the world premiere of *A Powerful Thang* in Yellow Springs, Ohio.



**A couple seeks intimacy in
Zeinabu irene Davis' *A Powerful Thang***

Why did you start making films?

It all goes back to the woman who this film is dedicated to, Gini Booth. I started at Brown as a pre-law student but got involved with Gini and a talk show she hosted called *Shades*. I worked with her and even got to do a couple segments. At first, I wanted to do something like her. But the process that really capped my move from in front of the camera to behind the camera was my trip to Kenya in 1981.

I went for a study abroad program, but Kenya at that time was—still is—in a period of political unrest, the struggle for a freer, multiple-party state. I began working with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, probably one of the most significant writers in Kenya. He was teaching at the university, but his real work involved this play he had written. The political and historical experience he was covering in the play was presented by the people who had actually been involved in the struggle he was trying to depict on stage. It was very exciting—very heady.

What was your role in the play?

Since I had the media experience with Gini at PBS, I was to do, well, Ngugi's vision was really broad, multimedia, and I was

supposed to do slides as a rear projection behind the action.

In the course of working on the play, we would sit on the verandas at the hotels in Nairobi, you know, drink beer, pass the time of day, and we would see all these German and Belgian film crews coming in to do documentaries—"Mutual of Omaha presents *The Wild Kingdom*" kind of thing. And it really, really freaked me out. I was totally amazed by all the stuff that was happening in Kenya, by all the diverse ethnic groups, and none of these crews paid any attention to the rich cultures there. The only people they ever depicted were the Masai because their lifestyle is so exotic.

Because they fit the romantic image Europeans have of wild Africa?

Right. So Ngugi said to me that it would be really good if I came back and we did a film together. I'm still working toward that.

Is he still writing and living in Nairobi?

No! He can't. He had to go. The play we were working on was closed down by the government after the first few days. Thousands of people had been able to see it because it was in this large outdoor arena. The government got really scared. You see, there was little differentiation between cast and crew, or cast and audience. Everyone had worked together to make it happen. The whole thing was bulldozed by the government and immediately Ngugi went into hiding. He had already spent a whole year in prison without explanation, a political prisoner. He escaped the country and lives as an exile, teaching in the States.

I can see how you were politicized by that experience. Did it influence you aesthetically?

One thing that African peoples share—I mean there's over 50 countries in Africa and who knows how many languages there are—is a visual language. Even though the actors may not speak a familiar language, the gestures, movement, expression ... there's something about seeing a story told on a screen that can make you understand what is going on.

For me, I am trying to create a visual language that is reflective of the African-American female experience, so I am very specifically trying to do projects which are based on the lives of women that I know. I am trying to not necessarily tell a story in strict narrative style, but to take some chances, take some risks in telling the story to get across the everyday experiences of black women's lives.

This is hard because our cinematic history, as black women, is in its infancy. I mean, Kathleen Collins was the first to do an independent feature film and that was in 1979 with *Cruise Brothers and Miss Molloy*. There are a number of black women making films now. Some names are becoming familiar like Julie Dash, Michelle Parkerson and Alile Sharon Larkin, but there are others: Camille Billops, Dareshi Kyi, O. Funmilayo Makarah, Angela Robinson, Jessie Maple, to mention a few.

This is your seventh piece since the mid-'80s. That seems pretty productive. How do you continue to do your work?

One, I'm crazy. Two, I'm hard-headed. Three, I put my own money into my projects, so I'm always broke!

Really, it is difficult to be a media artist in this country. In the

life of making a film, so much has to happen. It takes so much energy and so much money. You have to be so many different kinds of personalities: part hustler, part collaborator, part compromiser, part real persistence. You have to be able to talk to people in the public, business people. You have to convince people to believe in you, to trust your vision.

Most women are taking care of children or a mate and just trying to survive, particularly in this country where there is so little government support for what we do as media artists. There is some, but compared to other countries, there's nothing at all. Of course the other challenge for women is the intimidation factor.

Meaning?

You take a film or video class and find out there are a lot of people who want to make the process of making media very, very mysterious. They do not necessarily want to teach that any Joe Blow or Josephine Blow can pick up a camera and make a movie. They are intentionally closing the channels of expression and communication.

Is that why teaching media is important to you?

Yes. I spent \$40,000 learning how to do this work. Just because I spent that much money does not mean I think you have to. For me, it is very important to be a woman and to be a black person and to teach Joe and Josephine how to use the equipment. I think it is very important for me as a black woman to teach the production aspects of filmmaking because I'm not supposed to know how to do it. If I have a camera, well, I must have stolen it from somewhere.

I think it is very important for me as a black woman to teach the production aspects of filmmaking because I'm not supposed to know how to do it.

You said that black filmmaking is in its infancy. What do you mean by that?

We have the Johnson Brothers, we have Oscar Micheaux. We even have some women who were involved in the process. I believe Zora Neale Hurston was involved in filmmaking. I'd love to have the time to do the research to prove that. So there is a legacy, a history. But it is also limited by the economic factors of the United States. When there is a prosperous time, people are making films. When not, well, there haven't been many black men and black women who have been able to make films consistently in order to work out aesthetics and means of production. We're really just starting to do this. We don't have a well-developed black genre.



Zeinabu irene Davis' *Mother of the River* is the story of a young slave girl who is inspired by a mysterious woman.

What are the points of divergence from the European or Hollywood traditions? What signifies the work as developing a black aesthetic?

I see a parallel with the development of blues and jazz. We are involved with a process of artistic evolution. We can take this medium and make it our own as we did with these musical genres. This is part of the impetus for black filmmaking.

I've had conversations with A.J. Fielder about how we could shoot people in order to have it reflect their normal, everyday experiences, and how life doesn't really happen in 24 frames a second. Is there some other film speed that we should be using that would better reflect the ways we move as a people? All of these kinds of questions need to be asked.

How do you feel about the different visual languages of men and women, regardless of shared racial or ethnic culture?

Cycles, my film previous to *A Powerful Thang*, touches women. It doesn't matter what color they are. There's something about the way that I was able to construct the film in terms of pacing, and the actions, and what happens psychologically to the character in the course of the film.

The whole notion of time and having to wait for something to happen, it's very important to the female experience. It doesn't matter what country you're from.

All women all over the world are waiting for children, waiting for boyfriends, husbands, wives, whatever—waiting for telephones to ring. They're waiting for things to happen, waiting for menstruation to happen.

There was something going on in that film that really cut the nerve. They might not understand the whole thing. *Cycles* is a very dense film, but I think for the most part there was something that I hit upon that I would like to further explore in terms of delineating a language, a visual language, that specifically reflects the lives of women.

Even within your experimental format, you are concerned about realism. You want the characters to represent real people, not just ideas or points of view?

Yeah, it's not the character as idea, although I think I may do that at some point, and that would follow Third World cinema theory. In this work, I am trying to be much more realistic. Most people would probably term *Powerful Thang* Afro-centric.

Are you comfortable with that? How do you define Afro-centric?

First of all, I don't really like the term Afro-centric because there isn't really a clear definition or agreement about what you mean when you say Afro-centric. When I say it, what I mean is embracing my culture as someone from the African Diaspora. I use my experiences of being in Africa, being in the Caribbean and being in this country to make up what I put in my films.

To me, it is about really trying to understand and respect black culture, wherever it is, and to use it in my own life however it fits. In that sense, this film is Afro-centric because not only do I have black funk music from the '70s, but also traditional jazz music, and then there's West African and Afro-Cuban rhythms and Yoruba chants. Now how in the hell does all this fit in one film? Well, I think it does.

I am not necessarily trying to tell a story in strict narrative style, but trying to take some chances, take some risks in telling the story to get across the everyday experiences of black women's lives.

I noticed that Yasmine is underlined by the djembe drum and Craig is echoed by the sax and the funk music. Yasmine tends her altar of seashells and candles, and Craig carries his sax like a movable altar. You've used music to define them as separate, and yet to connect them.

I'm glad you got that. It works! For me, music is the bridge that has gotten us over or has gotten us through. It connects us to ourselves. The saxophone represents the magic and the memory of where we have been in Africa. Even though it is not the drum, it is the uniquely American contribution to the musical language of our culture.

The other thing that is really important to me is the women composers and instrumentalists who created the original soundtrack for this film. The three best female African drummers in the country are in this film. I didn't necessarily start out with that intention, but it happened. And I know it's gonna blow some people away because they have never seen a woman play the djembe drum, and these women can play!

The instruments are also a visual element. In the film, I pixillate the saxophone to animate it, to give it life. When Craig wakes up, the saxophone wakes up. It shimmies up onto the bed and is ready for Craig to play. He takes no notice as if this is normal.

For Yasmine, the magic is her bed. The scene where I pixillate—that's a long, tedious process of moving an object and shooting one

frame, then moving it again—her bed, which is a futon, changes from a couch to a bed as if to say, “Alright! I’m ready! At last I’m gonna get some use!” The bed, too, is personified. It is a celebration of the end of Yasmine’s celibacy. I mean, the bed is ready!

You told me one of the things you changed was making Yasmine a single mother. I know that when a child is young, and you are solely responsible, it can be very lonely and demanding. Why is that important to the story?

Two reasons. First, so many of my friends are black single mothers, and second, Asma, the woman I wanted to portray Yasmine, is a single mother. She’s not an actress, and I thought it would be easier for her to relate to the character. So her son is played by her son.

So while you were working on the script, you had already decided Asma should play Yasmine. Why was she so important to the story?

We are old friends, like sisters. We were in Kenya together. But one of the important reasons was that she has dreadlocks. There were very few, if any, examples of woman having their hair styled in dreadlocks in the mainstream when I started working on this film in ’88. Now there seems to be almost an explosion, from music videos to TV commercials. But still, to my knowledge we haven’t seen a black female lead who has long dreadlocks, so this must be a pioneering effort. It was important that this woman be very comfortable with herself, with her hair.

The other thing about dreadlocks is that I spend a lot of screen time on Yasmine washing her hair. I personally have had too many people ask me, “Do you wash your hair?” not, “How do you wash your hair?,” which is insulting. So America could be educated about how someone with dreadlocks washes their hair. This is strictly idiosyncratic, so-called cultural politics.

Interview first appeared in Angles, Volume 1, Number 2, 1992. © 1992 Ann Filemyr

Zeinabu irene Davis continues to make independent films. Her work is passionately concerned with the depiction of women of African descent. She is an associate professor of communication at University of California, San Diego. Her latest work, a dramatic feature film, Compensation, features two inter-related love stories that offer a view of black deaf culture.

She frequently writes on African-American cinema and has published in Black Film Review, Cineaste, and Afterimage. Davis has received numerous grants and fellowships from such sources as the Rockefeller Foundation, the American Film Institute and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Ann Filemyr is an assistant professor of communications at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Filmography

Filmstatement (10 min., 1982). Depiction of a woman’s experience from slavery to the present in Providence, RI.

Recreating Black Women’s Media Image (30 min., 1983). A profile of three Black women—a dancer, a poet and a museum director.

Crocodile Conspiracy (13 min., 1986), a middle-aged black woman makes the decision to visit communist Cuba.

Trumpetistically Clora Bryant (5 min., video documentary, 1989). An engaging portrait of a black woman trumpet player, Clora Bryant, who has been playing for over 45 years. Acquired by the Learning Channel for the “Through Her Eyes Series.”

Cycles (17 min., 1989). A psycho-spiritual meditation on an African American woman as she waits. Awards: Best Experimental Film, Big Muddy Film Festival; Best Drama, National Black Programming Consortium; Best of Category, Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame; Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial Exhibition of the Best American Film and Video.

Kneegrays in Russia (5 min., 1990). A portrait of a black female jazz instrumentalist who visits the Soviet Union.

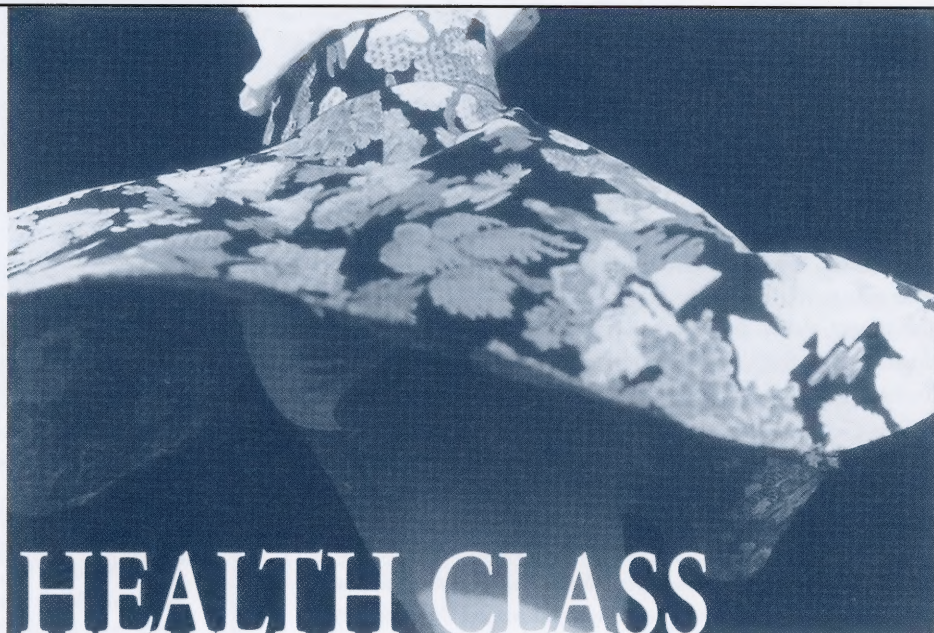
A Powerful Thang (57 min., 1991). Story of an African-American couple in southwest Ohio as they begin a new stage of intimacy in their relationship. Awards include: Best Narrative, Lawrence Kasdan Award, 30th Ann Arbor Film Festival; Honorable Mention, Best Feature, Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame.

A Period Piece (4 min., rap video, 1991). A satire on “feminine protection” that offers an alternative view of female confidence. Awards: Honorable Mention, ETA Creative Arts Foundation, African American Women and the Arts Festival, Chicago.

Mother of the River (28 min., 1995). Based on an old story that recurs throughout Africa and the African diaspora, this film is set in the antebellum South, when a young slave girl meets and is inspired by a mysterious woman of freedom and magic. A presentation of the Independent Television Service (ITVS), it won the following awards: Best Film and Video, Children’s Jury, 12th Annual Chicago International Children’s Fest; Best Short Feature, 6th New England Children’s Film Festival; Best of Category, Chris Award, 34th Columbus International Film Festival; Silver Hugo, Chicago International Film and Video Festival.

Compensation (92 min., 1999). Offering a view of black deaf culture, these two inter-related and bittersweet love stories are inspired by a poem from early black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. The film received the following awards: 1999 Reel Black Award for Outstanding Film, Black Film and Video Network; 1999 Gordon Parks Directing Award, Independent Feature Project, New York.

What we didn't learn in HEALTH CLASS



BY ELFRIEDA ABBE

WATCHING CATHY COOK'S FILM, *The Match That Started My Fire*, is an exhilarating experience. Listening to women talk about their first sexual feelings is a rush, but what makes this short film even more of a pleasure to watch is Cook's fun with the material. She's having a great time, and one senses that the women telling their stories are, too. Some of the stories are familiar—like the woman who loved to climb ropes in her grade school gym class or the woman who remembers teasingly twirling in a full skirt in front of the boys on the playground. One woman described discovering the childhood pleasure of scratching a strategically located chigger bite.

The stories are humorous, high-spirited, irreverent, surprising and evocative. Cook couples them with impressionistic images that are wickedly fun.

She interweaves the sanitized images of 1950s girls' sex education films and bathing-beauty contests with a collage of sensuous images—long limbs, exotic underwater creatures, dancing silhouettes. Some images of bondage suggest a darker, more dangerous side of sexual fantasy, but for the most part Cook's wry film evokes innocent sexual pleasures.

The real pleasure here, though, is listening to women tell their stories of sexual awakenings in their own words without the oppressive overlay of cultural expectations.

The Match That Started My Fire won the grand prize at the Ann Arbor Film Festival and first prize at the Baltimore International Film Festival.

Is *The Match That Started My Fire* the film you started out to make or did it evolve into something different?

I became interested in the subject of female sexuality in college when I did some work with a short educational film, *Personal Health for Girls*. It was a girls' growing-up film. When I looked at other sex education films, I found the approaches to explaining sexuality to boys and girls were very different. These were from the '50s, '60s and '70s. In most cases, sexual pleasure was explained to boys, and the girls were told what they could and could not do.

Sexuality was not discussed in the films for girls. There were some films for boys that actually talked about masturbation, but they did not talk about that with girls. So I realized there was a big void. Most people I know didn't get any guidance. We were brought up to believe sex was a boys' thing. Women didn't talk about it openly.

I started out working generally on how women grow up and what kind of information on etiquette, socializing, dating, sexuality they were getting. But I began to focus on the sexual information. When I told women about what I was doing, they just started telling me these stories of discovering sexual feelings.

In the film, we never see the women who are telling the stories. Why did you record the conversations over the phone?

It reminds me how important phone conversations are, how private they are and how important they are to me because I have most of my contact with other people over the phone. So the telephone has an importance to me. It reminds me, too, of girl talk. Like teenagers talking.

The Match That Started My Fire (above) won Best of Festival at the 30th annual Ann Arbor Film Festival and first place in experimental film at the Baltimore International Film Festival.



Cathy Cook

You sense the people telling the stories are enjoying it. Did you hear about any bad experiences?

There were some stories that were very disturbing. They were somewhat abusive. I chose to select the more positive stories. Most did not involve a partner. In other words, it's not about having sex for the first time. It's about discovering sexuality, your own sexuality.

Did you make an effort to get stories from women of different backgrounds?

Yes. I hope my films are pertinent to all women. One of my concerns is that there has been so much—and I'm not putting this down—but it happens right now that there is a lot of separation of gay and lesbian films. You have the category of women's films and the category of gay and lesbian films. I want to make films that are representative of women no matter what their ethnic background or sexual persuasion or class, and that is a sharing of women's perspectives of growing up.

I go to a lot of gay and lesbian film festivals. One thing I

notice in comparison to other film festivals is that the films are very strong in the erotic. I felt there weren't that many films out there otherwise that dealt with women's discoveries of the erotic.

The images in the film don't literally illustrate the narration, but complement it. How did you choose the imagery you did, such as the underwater footage of the stingray?

I wanted to have images that were not literally connecting with the story line. I was hoping there would be some images that would be a common thread and give the film an overall feel. The underwater footage tells the story of my sexuality without really telling the story. That is I used to go scuba diving, and I also grew up around a lot of water. I think water is terribly sensual. I think underwater is the ultimate in sensuality. It's where I turn into a fish, where I turn into another identity. I am part of the underwater world. I find all creatures are incredibly sensual, the weight of the water and everything else that goes along with it. The feeling I've had swimming underwater is phenomenal. I never feel so free as when I swim. That was the feeling I wanted to put in the film.

How does the eroticism in your films, which is at times voyeuristic, fit into feminist thinking?

I didn't always agree with the theorists' point of view—that is, in what I consider to be the old feminist thought of the late 1970s. When I was in school then, I felt there was a new erotic feminism that had not been brought out. That's when I started seeing that a lot of gay and lesbian films had this erotica. There was a lot of debate about what is pornographic and what is not, where that fine line was. And debate about female pleasure in general. From a feminist perspective that was always very challenging to me. I found myself in conflict with a lot of issues. That was basically what got me started on the exploration of this theme. I think there is an interesting new feminism that's come about that incorporates sexual pleasures and discoveries.

What kind of response do you get to the film?

One of the things I was hoping for, and so far it's worked, is that the film triggers a lot of discussion. After I've screened it, a lot of women will tell me their stories or they'll pick a story and say, "Oh, I used to do that." So they start talking about it and it seems to be fun for everybody. The other thing is I've had a lot of men really enjoy it because they actually learn a lot.

When I looked at sex education films, I found the approaches to explaining sexuality to boys and girls were very different. In most cases, sexual pleasure was explained to the boys. Sexuality was not discussed in the films for girls. So I realized there was a big void. Most people I know didn't get any guidance.

If women were supposedly liberated during the sexual revolution, why are we still finding it so hard to talk about our sexuality?

Yeah, but who was really having a good time? Who knows how many people felt good about it or later on had to deal with their conscience about it. Was it strictly a revolution for men to get as much sex as they wanted? Were women really discovering their sexuality? I don't think so. There's a lot of people having to completely restructure their self-respect, to re-group, after what happened to them sexually. Sexual revolution or not, there's still a stigma if a woman is promiscuous—she's a slut. It's still there. It wasn't that different in the '90s. Women still don't own their sexual pleasure. That's disturbing to me.

Like most of Cook's films, *June Brides* combines live action and animation.



How do you see your film in the broader context of sexuality and AIDS?

Somebody else asked me one time if this was an inappropriate film to make because of AIDS. There are a lot of people making AIDS consciousness films and videos. I wanted to open up the fact that we need to talk about different aspects of sexuality. I felt it was a very appropriate time to make a film like this.

Interview first appeared in Angles, Volume 1, Number 3, 1992. © 1992 Elfrieda Abbe

Cathy Cook teaches video and film production and animation at Sarah Lawrence College. Her recent work is *Beyond Voluntary Control*, an experimental film that deals with obsessions, phobias and diseases. Cook was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2001. She is collaborating on a multimedia project with dancer David Figueroa. Her work has been shown at the Flaherty Film Seminar, the Museum of Modern Art, the Ann Arbor Film Festival and others. She did the art direction on Yvonne Rainer's *Murder* and *murder*, Su Friedrich's *Hide and Seek* and Zeinabu Davis's *Compensation*. She has an MFA in Film/Video and Women's Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Filmography

June Brides (10 min., 1987). "Cathy Cook flips the middle-class stereotypes of the church wedding on its head, mixing animation and performance to create a funny and poignant critique of marriage rituals."
—Cara Mertes, curator for "Dirt & Domesticity," Whitney Museum of Art.

Bust Up (7 min., 1989). A gender-bending tea party-turned-horror story.

The Match That Started My Fire (19 min., 1991). The telephone rings and the girl-talk begins: secrets emerge and confessions build. An exciting experimental comedy in which the joy of sexual pleasure is discovered and experienced by women in their childhood and early teens. Climbing a rope, descending a slide, being stung by insects ... a host of women tell their hilarious anecdotes of "the match that started their fire." The film is a visual montage of images that evoke a world of 1960s kitsch and nostalgia, with occasional darker hints of taboo and transgression.

Mother Nature (5 min., 1996). Mother? Why a mother? Who keeps those birch trees white anyway? And does "Mother" have any relationship to domestic household duties? This short film depicts the imagined, the assumed and the connotations connected to what most Earth dwellers believe are the responsibilities of Mother Nature.

Beyond Voluntary Control (30 min., 2000). The filmmaker breaks new cinematic territory by devising a visual language that explores the psychological and emotional effects of physical confinement in her latest film, *Beyond Voluntary Control*. Stimulating the senses through haunting and poetic images, the film imaginatively conveys the obsessions, phobias and illnesses constricting personal freedom. While lyrically meditating on the limits of the body, Cook incorporates the evocative movements of modern dancer, David Figueroa, and blends a mesmerizing soundtrack set to the poems by Emily Dickinson and Sharon Olds. Through Figueroa's gestures and dance, along with a moving interview of Cook's own mother suffering from Parkinson's, the film succeeds in humanizing and reconciling the effects of physical metamorphosis and stasis. Through artistry and visual astuteness, *Beyond Voluntary Control* innovatively investigates the limits of human physicality and movement.

Re-imagining HISTORY



Filmmaker explores her family's lost past

AFTER YOU SEE REA TAJIRI'S *History and Memory: Akiko & Takashige*, you will never look at documentaries in the same way. What Tajiri conveys in her work is not only factual information, but also the power of speaking the truth of one's own experiences.

The documentary is a personal account of the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, including her mother's and father's families—even though her father was serving in the U.S. Army at the time. She tells how the bombing of Pearl Harbor changed the lives of 110,000 Japanese-Americans who were forced by the U.S. government to sell their property, homes, cars, possessions and businesses and go to the camps. The experience was so painful that after the war, her parents, like many others, seldom talked about it. Thus, many of the firsthand accounts of what happened were lost.

In *History and Memory*, Tajiri integrates old film clips, newsreels, family stories and photographs, her writings and original footage to reclaim and retell her family's history and, symbolically, that of the thousands of Japanese-Americans who were detained in camps.

During a series of interviews, Tajiri talked about her work, her family's experiences and the importance of re-imagining and re-creating history that has been lost.

In *History and Memory* Rea Tajiri tells the story of her parents, who were among the 110,000 Japanese-Americans interned during World War II.

***History and Memory* has so many layers—original footage, dramatizations, your observations, archival material, Hollywood film clips, newsreels. How did you determine the structure?**

When I conceived the project, I wanted it to be nonlinear because I was interested in the way the mind works. I wanted to try and re-create some kind of idea about backward and forward time movement, to have these intermittent flashes of an image—like the woman with the canteen.

So that was one impulse; the other is that I think when you're a member of a community whose history has been underdocumented, deleted or misrepresented in some way, your project becomes how to rectify this, how to reconstruct history from the pre-existing evidence. The internment was so underdocumented in terms of firsthand experience that I wanted to show representations or the absence of representations from all the different sources, including propaganda films and popular cultural imagery.

I wanted to point to their original sources whose point of view recorded these images and interweave these with the voices of my relatives telling their anecdotes. I wanted to include personal material and "memory" to contrast with the sanctioned views of the internment.

I set out to interview my mother, but first I went to Poston [Arizona] where she had been interned. I shot some footage there. Then, I had this very frustrating interview with her where she said she didn't remember anything. She claimed she was only in camp two weeks.

After I returned to New York, I went to the National Archives to do research, and I found some photographs. I found the photograph of my grandmother. I also found the log book with

my mother's entry and exit dates. I realized my mother had been in camp a year.

The whole process of discovery, while reflecting back on what I had known or seen in movies from the time of '42 put into context with the voices and memories of my family, was what I refer to as reconstructing history. It's presenting a much more complex reading of history, full of ironies and contradictions, but hopefully filling in the blanks.

It became more like a mission to try to uncover my family's history, not so much even just for my family and myself, but as a symbolic gesture to the larger community of Sansei.

What was your reaction when you found this documentation?

I turned over the photograph of my grandmother and saw from the label that it was from a camp bird-carving class. I had this flash of a bird that my mother had in her jewelry box. It was instant recognition from childhood memories—very emotional. That was a hard thing. How do you represent that feeling in the film?

The log book also was very shocking. I wanted to hurry home and call my mother and tell her what I had found. It was a very sad feeling because I realized there was so much that had been suppressed and forgotten, that if I hadn't been there and found those things, they might not ever have come to light.

After that, it became more like a mission to try to uncover my family's history, not so much even just for my family and myself, but as a symbolic gesture to the larger community of Sansei [third generation Japanese-Americans], who had similar experiences, and to other communities, especially people of color, where there is undocumented history.

In Lise Yasui's *Family Gathering*, she also talks about her parents' reluctance to talk about their internment experiences. Why do you think there is this kind of reticence?

It was an extremely painful period for a lot of people. There was a sense of embarrassment. Part of it was not really having that experience verified in a larger societal context. A lot of people outside the Japanese-American community either denied the camps existed, or ignored it, or [justified it by saying] it was for protection, for military security. There was so much a feeling of having been sought out on the basis of race that for some there was an attempt to normalize and blend in, not to bring it up. In other families, camp was talked about very openly and was acknowledged in the course of their lives.

At the time, there were people who were vocal, who tried to confront the government and were punished. After camp, I think most were anxious to make up for lost time. People tried to get on with their lives.

You read a letter from your uncle who left the country because of the racism he experienced.

He's really an interesting person. He's an artist who lives in Holland. Everyone used to say, "Oh, he's very bitter about the war."

My childhood perception of him was that he held a grudge. It was an old perception. During the making of the piece, I asked him for a statement since I couldn't interview him in person. What I received was this incredible letter which very eloquently recounted his experiences, his anger and his pain. He was angry about having returned from the war after being wounded defending his country and being treated with the same prejudice as before he left. He left for Europe after living in Chicago for a year, saying his constitutional rights had been violated. He vowed he would never return to live in America again, and he never has.

What's the story behind the image you repeat in the video of the woman filling the canteen with water?

My mother told my sister that she was out in the desert. She remembers filling this canteen. I was real young and every time someone mentioned the word "camp," I would have an image of my mother filling a canteen. I never quite connected why until I began making the piece. I tried to re-create that image in the work—the image that keeps appearing, that keeps reminding you of something forgotten.

Other than that, there was never any discussion about camp in a personal sense, no recollections. I learned a bit about it in school. It almost seemed unreal. I've talked to a lot of Sansei, and they, too, say it seems unreal. The piece provided an opportunity to go back.

Your mother didn't remember much of Poston. What was your experience when you went there?

Well, first of all it was funny because I was thinking about the piece, and I really wanted to go very badly. I didn't have any money. The next day someone called me and asked me to come in on a job. They said part of it was in Arizona near Phoenix. They were apologetic. It was this incredible coincidence because that was where I wanted to go. It was like a blessing.

I called ahead to find out where Poston is, and how do I get there. I found out it was on an Indian reservation, and that was so completely startling. It made me upset and angry. When I called to make a [hotel] reservation, and I gave my name, the woman said, "Oh, I know you're coming here to see the camps, aren't you? A lot of your people come." When I drove into town it was very alienating.

The first day, a woman from the reservation took me around, and we had a nice interaction. We shared some of our experiences. She told me she remembered the day the army came in and set up the camps.

The second day, I went back alone to two different sites. It was very strange because you could almost hear or feel some kind of presence. It was a very strange feeling.

Later on I told people this, and they said, "Oh yes, when the workers are out in the field they say they can hear voices." There really was a presence there. There was this feeling of a lot of sadness, that something sad had transpired there.

Was the finished documentary different from what you thought it would be?

The first couple of cuts were really less personal. I think I felt funny about making it biographical. As I continued to work on it, I realized there was something more specific underneath it all, that the whole process I was going through making the piece was such a difficult, painful experience that it had to become part of the piece.

I decided to include more of the story about my search and to use some of the more personal/poetic writing I'd done about the process of discovery and the sense of loss I'd felt as a child and adult. I think this reaches a much broader audience and ultimately was very important.

Did you come to terms with your mother's inability to remember?

At first, I couldn't understand why somebody would want to suppress this when it seemed politically so important. I talked to other people who told me about similar experiences of trying to get their parents to talk about the camps and of having a feeling that something tragic must have happened. A lot of Sansei have this incredible sense of loss or pain. You feel you're carrying some kind of burden.

At first, I felt she was doing this on purpose, but as time went on it became clearer that it was completely lost to her. Whatever she had to do to survive had to do with trying to forget about those experiences. She didn't have the resources to do it any other way, and that was her way of surviving.

You use Hollywood films such as *Bad Day at Black Rock* and *Come See the Paradise* in the film to show different ways Japanese-Americans are portrayed in popular culture. But both films are from the perspective of white men. What did you want to show with these particular films?

In both of these films, I felt I had to answer back to the screen. I had to have my rebuttal so to speak. I was also interested in quoting from these films to show how Hollywood forms a lot of our ideas about history along with other ways in which we perceive history or the past. Hollywood films re-create and reconstruct history all the time.

Bad Day at Black Rock was one of the few films that I knew of that dealt with an Asian-American character, Komoko, who is specifically identified as being Japanese-American. It's also one of the few films where there is reference to the fact of the internment. In the story Komoko had a son who saved the Spencer Tracy character in battle during World War II, but of course both Komoko and his son have been killed—the son saving Tracy's life, the father because of anti-Japanese racism during WWII. The film is lauded as having liberal politics for its time, but of course, there is not a single image of an actual Japanese-American. So I wanted to point that out: first, our invisibility in the eyes of Hollywood and second, always having someone else being our interpreter and speaking out for us. [Tracy's character avenges Komoko's death.] It was important to quote from this film in terms of how popular culture represented the internment.

In *Come See the Paradise*, I think Alan Parker tried very hard to be PC about how he positioned the point of view by having the female lead [played by Tamlyn Tomita] narrate the story. But

it seems like an afterthought and very false. There is this white love interest who brings us into the family. It couldn't just be a story about a Japanese-American family. I wanted to include my nephew's commentary as a Yonsei (fourth generation). I thought of how after the Issei and Nisei, the firsthand witnesses to the experience of internment, are gone, this film will remain for you to see as some kind of documentation, as flawed as it is.

In *Bad Day at Black Rock*, Spencer Tracy is looking for Komoko, who disappeared. You point out that we never see Komoko and that his "absence is his presence." How does that relate to your experience and to the broader community?

I think I was referring to a couple of things: first, the absence of images of Asian-Americans in mainstream Hollywood film and second, that as a child my perception of where we fit, in terms of the society at large, often felt like we just didn't exist. So when I say, "Our absence is also our presence," I'm alluding to how invisible we felt. Then, I guess I was thinking about this notion that we're always perceived as somewhat expendable, invisible, passive, quiet, the post war-model-minority-miracle. ("They went through the internment but still went on to become contributing



Human rights activist Yuri Kochiyama in Rea Tajiri's *Passion for Justice*.

members of society.") So I guess it's time to create images where there are so few, and this is happening with a lot of Asian-American filmmakers who are out there now.

What question do you wish someone would ask you about the video?

A lot of the questions tend to focus on me personally because it is a personal piece. But I think that ultimately, it's a very universal piece. It was meant to address certain issues about what Sansei face in their lives, the kind of loss that they feel. That wasn't covered in earlier documentaries. The earlier documentaries had to bring up the facts about internment. I hoped that my piece could also address some of what it felt like growing up knowing these things. And also that it would reach a broader community about issues of under-representation, undocumented history and re-imagining history.

What do you mean by re-imagining history?

What I mean by that is in the video, I impersonate my mother filling the canteen. In other words, I dressed up to match a picture of my mother taken while she was in camp (although my mother always points out she never wore her hair that way). We shot the scene of me filling the canteen as I had always seen it in

my imagination. It was an image I had conjured up as a child listening to my mother recount her memory of camp. I imagined and tried to re-create something she had remembered. Ultimately, I re-imagined something she has now forgotten because she says she never remembers recounting this story.

What is your background, and how did you start working in video?

I was actually an art major at the California Institute of the Arts. I started out painting. I felt pretty alienated in terms of the kind of dialogue that was going on and was constantly figuring out how I fit in. I was one of the few students of color there. Eventually, I became interested in media criticism and media deconstruction. Although these works were not directly about identity or race, I was aware as an Asian-American woman of how much my experience was unrepresented, how much influence the media had, and how much it lied. I eventually got interested in video as a means of talking back and appropriating the media. Eventually, I used it to create my own images.

Video was the easiest and cheapest way at the time. And there was room for experimentation. It was a quicker turnaround time, more accessible and more affordable. It came down to basic economics.

What about film?

I was interested in taking film courses but [the school] made it very difficult for people outside the film department to take film. Then, once you were in the film course, [the teachers] made it seem so mysterious and inaccessible. It became very intimidating.

Later, when I got out of school, I got my first film job as production assistant on *El Norte*, followed by a string of other P.A. jobs on low-budget features. Eventually, I moved to New York and interned at Film Video Arts. I saw the process broken down, and that you can make a film or video for very little money if you're resourceful and the equipment is available.

How did you learn to use video?

I took some classes at school, then I tried teaching myself. I tried

to work around what I didn't know. After I got out of school, I started getting more technical training at FVA where I interned in exchange for classes. A lot of things I learned on the job, working on crews or, later, working in the field as an editor.

Has media-making become more accessible to women and minorities through community access centers?

There has been this opportunity for people to realize that media does not have to be unobtainable. It's demystified. With very simple means you can actually produce something out of nothing. The second hardest part rests on the responsibility of the maker to commit the energy, time to learn the skills properly, to finish the projects and to learn to be as resourceful as possible.

Interview by Elfrieda Abbe, first appeared in Angles, Volume 1, Number 4, 1992. © 1992 Elfrieda Abbe

Rea Tajiri is a third generation Japanese-American who grew up in Chicago. She has an MFA from the Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. Currently she is working on a digital film inspired by Haruki Murakami's novel, The Wind Up Bird Chronicle, about the complex relationships between members of a contemporary Asian-American family. She lives in New York City.

Filmography

History and Memory (1991). Received the International Documentary Association Distinguished Achievement Award (1991), Special Jury Prize at the San Francisco International Film Festival (1992).

Passion for Justice (1993). A documentary about human rights activist Yuri Kochiyama. Co-producer with Pat Saunders.

Strawberry Fields (1997). A dramatic narrative.

Little Murders (1998). A digital video about the mystery of death, communication of spirits and the redemption that comes from knowing the truth.

History Alice Guy-Blaché



THE LIFE OF pioneer filmmaker Alice Guy-Blaché is documented in Marquise Lepage's fascinating *The Lost Garden*.

Guy-Blaché (1873-1968) is worthy of critical and historical recovery. Her contributions to film include the use of slow motion, fast motion, stops, fade-outs, double exposures, sound film and color processes.

She started her film career in Paris while working as secretary for Leon Gaumont,

who manufactured film and cameras. She was fascinated with the new moving picture technology and made little films to help Gaumont sell his products. Gaumont soon appointed her the company's first movie director. For Gaumont, she produced more than 100 sound shorts and hired colorists to paint directly onto film stock. She directed what is thought to be the first film narrative, *Le fee aux choux*. Guy-Blaché came

to New York in 1910 and started her own film production company, Solax Films, which she later moved to New Jersey, where it became the largest studio in the United States. In 1957, the French government awarded her the Legion of Honor for her contribution to French cinema.

—Excerpt from review by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, Volume 3, Numbers 3&4, 1998

BY KATHRYN PRESNER

QUEBEC-BASED Dorothy Todd Hénaut had been a housewife for eight years when she decided to pursue "the only option open for women in the early '60s"—secretarial school. But it was her work as a civil rights and peace activist that broadened her horizons and eventually led her to the National Film Board of Canada.

NFB primarily funds documentaries and animated works, but they also include fiction shorts and features. The NFB's production arm is divided into studios, according to genre and the language of the production.

Before joining the NFB, Hénaut worked with peace group The Voice of Women, founded a bilingual magazine for craftspeople, *The Craftsman/L'artisan*, and worked at Expo '67 in the Youth Pavilion. Her resourcefulness, publishing experience and activism were just the right mix for the NFB's Challenge for Change project, which she joined in 1968 as editor of its publication, *Access*.

Today's media activism is rooted in programs such as Challenge for Change. The idea was to help community groups learn to use video to promote social change. It was the beginning of Hénaut's 25-year association with the NFB in many different roles. At the NFB, she learned to make films and at the same time found the financial stability she needed as a single parent raising two children.

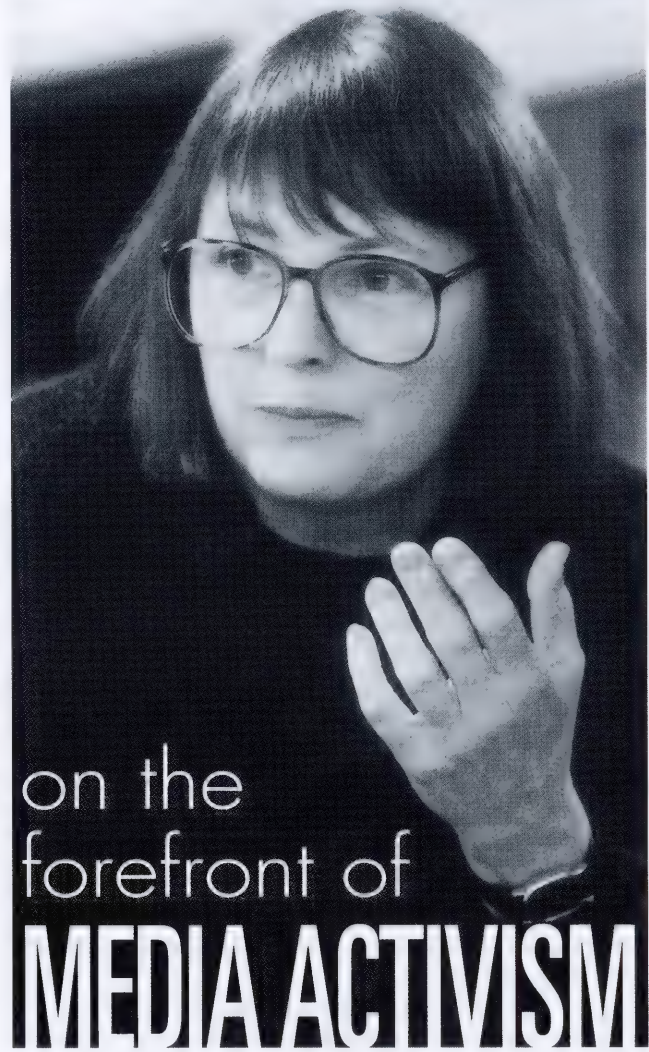
When Challenge for Change ended, Hénaut worked at Studio C, the NFB's "general potluck studio." Soon she was invited by Kathleen Shannon to join the newly founded Studio D, inaugurated to mark International Women's Year. She directed and produced there from 1977 to 1989.

As a director, Hénaut explored issues such as renewable energy in the award-winning films *The New Alchemists* and *Sun, Wind and Wood*. Between 1979 and 1982, she produced one of NFB's most popular and controversial films, *Not a Love Story/C'est surtout pas de l'amour*, an exploration of pornography directed by Bonnie Klein.

Hénaut's film *Firewords/Les Terribles vivantes* looks at the lives and works of three Quebec women writers: Louky Bersianik, Jovette Marchessault and Nicole Brossard.

She describes her 1988-89 film, *Song for Quebec/Quebec... un peu... beaucoup... passionnément* as "a love story about the past thirty years in Quebec, as lived by singer Pauline Julien and poet/politician Gerald Godin." The English version was broadcast on PBS and Global TV as part of the series *Canada True North*.

I interviewed Hénaut for *Hersay*, an informational women's radio show in Montreal. The interview was edited for *Angles*.



Could you say a few words about Challenge for Change?

Challenge for Change was a program experimenting with the use of media as a tool to promote understanding and provoke social change. It had strong support from the Canadian government. It was at a time when the government believed in social justice.

The program actually started in '67. I started working there in '68, and quite rapidly Bonnie Klein and I got the idea of working with video organizations and citizens groups.

We were trying to give a media voice to the voiceless, not by doing it for them but by teaching them to do it themselves. People from all over Canada started asking us to come and work with them. I've worked in every province in the country helping video community groups. A lot of the women who became filmmakers started out in some of these local video groups that we helped to found.

Canadian Dorothy Hénaut was among the filmmakers who helped change the landscape for women in media.

Can you talk about the relationship between documentary filmmaker and documentary subject?

One of the important ethical things in Challenge for Change, which marked me very strongly, was that the filmmaker felt a responsibility toward the people on the screen, felt an obligation toward them. The people on the screen always [knew] that if there was something that really deeply disturbed them, I would take it out of the film. In fact, the confidence that is [established] is to me the very essence of documentary filmmaking as I live it. The trust and the ethics involved in filming people are extremely important. I could never take peoples' images behind their backs—the kind of hit and run journalism that television has gotten us so used to.

I think that partially means I couldn't make a film about people I didn't like. In other words, it's not from me you're going to get the hard-nosed journalistic critical look at the world.

I know when we were making *Not a Love Story*, I couldn't have directed it. I produced it. I could not have directed it because my mind, heart and soul are looking for alternatives to the horror. I'm not fueled by anger. Bonnie is a far more probing questioner, although her ethics are impeccable.

But the point of it is, when the film was finished we took it and showed it to all the people on the screen, including the porn purveyors. We showed it to them, and they thought it was fine. It didn't bother them. They felt it was honest ... it allowed them room to speak their own piece, and it did not falsely manipulate them.

Tell me about the making of *Not a Love Story*.

Not a Love Story was one of the most difficult projects. It was so heart-wearying to see all this proof of hatred of women and even hatred of sexuality.

Out of the four women who worked on the film—we were in the cutting room for a year and a half—only one, Bonnie, was married and had a wonderful husband who was able to go through the whole process without putting a stress on their marriage. But the rest of us became celibate. We literally became celibate. We were not able to deal with men during the course of being surrounded by all that woman hatred. Man-generated woman hatred is what pornography is, and that was extremely, extremely hard emotionally. I got burned out at least twice in the course of that. The editor had to go off twice for three weeks at a time just to find some kind of peace and sanity. It was a very, very hard project.

Afterwards, I worked for at least a year and a half or two years on distribution, traveled with it, talked to audiences. That was very, very intense. Lots of audience members would be in tears and agony. The pain they felt was terrible. And men were either angry or devastated. Without [a network], they felt very isolated in that desolation.

Would you say that working at an all-women's studio has changed the way you make films?

I think there's a different way of being when you're all women. The working teams for the most part were a real pleasure. It's much easier to listen a lot without being considered a lightweight. There's not a sense of competitiveness. There's more a sense of collaboration. Each person is appreciated for what she can contribute. I wouldn't like to paint too rosy a picture because we're all living in this world,

If I have to choose
between form and
content, I'll choose
content, but I don't think
you should have to choose

and we're full of jealousies and incomprehension—the whole bit. But the teamwork in making a film—*Firewords*—with an all women crew was a wonderful experience.

I would certainly never say I had a hellish time working with men at all, but there is something different about the atmosphere when women are working together. It's a peaceful space in which to nurture each other. You have a sense you want to help each other.

You mentioned earlier that you took *Not a Love Story* on the road and discussed it with audiences. Was that a special case or do you get to travel with all your films?

I'm not getting paid to go to screenings for *A Song for Quebec*, but I cannot resist when I'm invited. I also go to a lot of screenings of other people's films. Right from the very beginning in Challenge for Change, we spent enormous amounts of time with our films because they were designed to catalyze discussion and provoke social change. That's also true of the Studio D films, where we spent a lot of time with audiences in various parts of the country pulled together for various reasons. I know it's possible at the Film Board and outside the Film Board to finish a project and go on with the next film. I make a plea to anyone who wants to get involved with filmmaking: go sit in audiences, lead discussions, sit in the back row and listen because every time you hear an audience discuss your film, you get to know—in your gut know, not just in your head know—what your film is doing. Any film proposal that I write includes a paragraph or two saying what I hope the effect on the audience will be.

You have to try not to be defensive, god only knows we all do that. But just listen and dialogue. You learn so much that is going to make your next film better. It's like you absorb through your pores. I sit in the audience. I don't just come in afterwards for the discussion. I sit through the whole thing. I listen to how much they laugh, how much they gasp, where the silences are. It makes all the difference to me. That's where my confidence as a filmmaker comes from because I never went to school. I made it up as I went along.

Do you think the NFB shelters filmmakers from the real filmmaking world?

I think it shelters filmmakers from the real filmmaking world which has no room for heartfelt [work,] which virtually destroys people who have something they want to say which is not what people in society want to hear.

The Film Board is an incredibly generous place to be making films because everybody there is truly generous with their time and their comments. They'll come and look at your film, and they'll criticize it intelligently and kindly. They will also make suggestions and they won't begrudge you if you don't follow them. They understand that lots of people make suggestions and all the suggestions are contradictory. You follow the ones you feel like following.

I work so intensely and so exhaustively. I put an enormous amount of my own emotions and my own guts in [projects], and I've also spent alternate times when I wasn't working on a film fighting for the Film Board, for my union and for Studio D. I needed my sabbatical this year. I also need security. I don't think I would have stayed in filmmaking, because I had children to bring up, if it hadn't been for the Film Board.

Some people say there's a certain NFB style, that they can tell if the film they're watching is an NFB film. Do you as an NFB filmmaker feel obligated to make a certain film that fits into that style?

No, I feel obligated to make a film that's highly respectful of my audience. In other words, one that doesn't thumb its nose at the audience, one that has a certain amount of clarity which is not the same as simplemindedness. I will try to remove confusion unless confusion is an essential part of the gestalt of the film. I tend to want something really well crafted.

I love the editing process. One of the things about the Film Board that may be referred to as a Film Board style is that we usually have more time to edit. And at a certain point in the editing, when you're almost finished, you do a whole bunch of screenings and tests with people. You make major changes then. Then at a certain point, you and the editor go back and you look at a lot of outs. You discover something you had almost forgotten, and you have the time to do that.

I have never made a film, and I would never make a film that wasn't going to last a good 10 years. In fact, *The New Alchemists* was made years ago [1974]. It's still being used. I might go for a classic style rather than the kind of style that's going to be in this year, because if you get a super hip style this year, it's going to be out next year. It's like my clothes. They've got to last 20 years because I never throw them away.

I don't think this means sobriety. I don't have anything at all against experimenting with form, but not just for the sake of it. It has to come out of the meaning of the film. If I have to choose between form and content, I'll choose content, but I don't think you should have to choose.

I never agreed that there is this kind of Challenge for Change theory that you didn't have to make a film fabulous as long as it was virtuous. In terms of filmmaking or TV-making, to me the essence is to be passionate about something. Passion for life, for the world, for ideas, for other humans, that's the most precious thing.

*First published in Angles, Volume 2,
Number 2, 1993. © 1993 Kathryn Presner*

Dorothy Todd Hénaut retired from the National Film Board of Canada in 1996. She is a founder and board member of the Recontres Internationales du Documentaire and a co-chair of the Canadian Independent Film Caucus, Quebec Chapter. For now, Hénaut has put aside filmmaking in order to explore other artistic avenues. She is painting, and using objects and spaces to create mixed media works.

Kathryn Presner, who was a documentary filmmaker at the time she wrote this article, is now working in Web design and development in Montreal.

Filmography

The New Alchemists (28 min., 1974). At a farm in Massachusetts, a small group of people, including some scientists, explore possibilities for more humane, self-sufficient lifestyles involving interrelated food-producing systems and small-scale solar and wind technology. Their work is a model for others with the vision of a greener, kinder world and a taste for inventing the future.

Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography (producer, 68 min., 1981), directed by Bonnie Sherr Klein. A thought-provoking chronicle of the odyssey of two women, Bonnie Klein, the director of the film, and Linda Lee Tracey, a stripper. Together they set out to explore the world of peep shows, strip joints and sex supermarkets. Both are motivated by the desire to know more about pornography—why it exists, the forms it takes, and how it affects relations between men and women.

A Song for Quebec (55 min., 1988). A living history—that of Quebec's last 40 years—is seen not through the careful reconstruction of the academic historian but from the viewpoint of a couple in love with each other as well as the cause of Quebec's independence. Pauline Julien through her songs, and Gérald Godin through his poetry, provide an intimate look at the events which have marked Quebec's evolution.

Firewords, Part 1-3: Louky Bersianik, Jovette Marchessault, Nicole Brossard (84 min., 1986). *Firewords* offers an intimate glimpse of three respected yet controversial Quebec writers. Now recognized at home and abroad, Louky Bersianik, Jovette Marchessault and Nicole Brossard have contributed greatly to the creation of a distinctive women's literature. Confirming that fresh approaches to literature are still possible, they have helped to heighten the awareness of the politics of language. They examine personal and global issues from a feminist perspective: human relationships, work, justice, poverty, loneliness and women's spirituality.

Heartbeats (20 min., 1992). Using imagery of exquisite intimacy, this video dispels the myth that pregnancy and eroticism are mutually exclusive. The camera, shooting mainly in close-up, celebrates the glorious ripeness of a very pregnant woman.

BEHIND THE Camera



MICHELLE CRENSHAW worked on both independent and studio features in Chicago. She moved to Los Angeles several years ago to get more experience working on feature films. Once a still photographer, she switched careers after taking a film course at Columbia College in Chicago. In the late '80s, when production was booming in Chicago and there was a shortage of loaders and second assistants, Crenshaw was accepted into an International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees training program. She continued her membership in the Chicago local and worked toward union membership in Los Angeles.

In addition to working on features such as *Uncle Buck*, *The Untouchables*, *Home Alone* and *Dennis the Menace*, Crenshaw produced and directed her own work, *Skin Deep*, a moving account of her experiences as a young black girl confronting racism. The film was shown at Women in the Director's Chair International Film and Video Festival in Chicago. She worked on Christine Choy's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* and the PBS series *Eyes on the Prize Part II*. She was first camera assistant on Harpo Productions' *There Are No Children Here* and *When We Were Colored*.

How did your career develop?

When I was 21, I left my hometown of Detroit to come to Chicago. I went to study large format photography. I was disappointed in the program. Someone told me about Columbia College. It has a huge photo department as well as film and video. When I found out they had a film department, it was like a light bulb just went off in my head. I ended up going there part time and then being a full-time film student, knowing when I enrolled that I was interested in camera—anything that had to do with lights, film, camera movement, telling a story that way. I grew up in the arts so I do have some artistic background, but I feel using a camera to interpret a story is where I'm best suited.

After leaving Columbia College, I worked for awhile as an audio-video technician in a hospital. I used to videotape surgeries, do a lot of slide work and some still work for the medical profession. The union was opening up at the time. That was in 1985 and '86, when production was starting to grow in Chicago and they needed loaders and second assistants. I left [the hospital] and started training in the union as a camera assistant and went up the ranks. I was a loader. From a loader I became a second assistant, and from a second assistant I moved up to a first.

Was the union just opening up to women?

They were starting to be aware of maybe having minorities, but not necessarily women. When I joined, there was really only one working female union member that I know of. I'm just speaking for Chicago. From what I know, Maggie Fox was the most visible female who was consistently working.

Describe your experiences in the industry.

First of all, for the people who are part of pre- or post-production, it's a job. It's a business and people make a living and have families based on this. It's a competitive job—it's not just based on skills, but who you know as well as what you know. I think that sometimes leaves people with a lot of insecurity. They're only going to give you so much information to work on, for you as an individual to build your skills. That's why this is one of the few industries that has so much nepotism, because it is about gaining knowledge through doing. There's only so much you can learn through school, then you have to actually get out there and do the job. Well, how do you get to the point where you can do the job and feel comfortable? It's a lot of politicking, a lot of finding the right social or political camp you can be in that will allow you the opportunity to do your job and make a decent living.

How do you put yourself forward?

Through professional organizations, school and putting yourself out there and finding out who is who. By not being too aggressive, but being persistent enough so if you call someone one month and don't hear from that person, you call again two months down the road. Just don't make one phone call and expect this person is all of a sudden going to be accountable.

In your case wasn't the timing important?

Yes, the timing was good. There was a shortage of people. I was doing non-union work. I would use my sick days and days off and do non-union commercials. But even though the timing was right then, the film industry is driven by supply and demand, so times do change. Right now [1995], Chicago is slow. You have to prepare so when the time does arrive, you are able to contribute. I had services they needed that I was able to provide because I knew things beforehand. I managed to move quickly, but I also knew a lot. I surprised some people about how much I knew.

How do you learn if you're in a situation where people won't share information?

I did a lot of projects at school. I was constantly active. I worked in the film cage. I was twenty-one when I went back, and I knew exactly what I wanted to do. There was no floundering. I didn't want to direct or write or act. I wasn't trying to find where my space was within the industry. I knew I wanted to do camera. I went there specifically learning everything I could technically that had to do with the camera.

Why did you move to Los Angeles, and what was it like when you first got there?

Things were going well for me in Chicago. I had moved up to first assistant and was turning down a lot of second assistant jobs. But I had to spend time in L.A. and get it out of my system. I was at a point where I was moving up in my career. There will be a lot more challenges for me here, especially as I move up in the ranks of the camera department. My ultimate goal is developing and working on features.

Basically, I took one step backwards. But I knew a lot of people here because some first assistants from L.A. had worked in Chicago. I also knew what to do. I can make phone calls on my own and send out my resume. You just go out and network. The film community is small enough that you'll meet people. I'm really on my own. I do know other assistants and camera operators I talk to, but it's a business, based on competition—even though you might have allies. But if you are both camera assistants applying for the same job, how much support can you expect to get?

What are some of the differences between working in Chicago and L.A.?

Chicago is a smaller community, and it's very union. People don't have as much choice. Now that I'm living in L.A., there's a lot of non-union work. There's a lot of work, period. The major difference is money, when you have the major studios which are under union contract. But there are some very good non-union shows that do happen. As far as money goes, you can make a very good living working non-union—you just don't have pension, health and welfare benefits.

Also, it's a bigger territory, and there's more variety of jobs. I've worked on two features. They are both non-union low

budget features. I've worked on *Out of Sync*, *White Man's Burden*, and music videos. I never clicked with the commercial industry. I'm pretty much a documentary, feature person. That's my network. I've been working on documentaries for the BBC. Until I get into the union, I have to search around and get the best non-union stuff I can get, and network with camera operators and DPs who do decent non-union work.

Other than pay scale, what are some of the union benefits?

While you're working, you accumulate a certain amount of funds based on dollar amounts per hour. Even though I've been out of the [Chicago] area for a year, I was covered [with health insurance] because I had accumulated that fund. I'm still a union member there. I still pay quarterly dues. If a job comes along that takes me from L.A. to Chicago, I'm qualified to work.



Michelle Crenshaw was the camerawoman for *Watermelon Woman*, directed by Cheryl Dunye

What has helped you get where you are?

Being somewhat nurturing and supportive, honest, reliable and responsible. If I can't do a job or there's a piece of equipment I'm not familiar with, I say I'm not familiar with it. I don't try to fudge my way through. If you don't have back-up, you can't fudge your way through. I've seen it happen. For a woman or any minority, that's the worst thing you can do for yourself.

I've done all the freebies I can do. I put out my time. I hung around, I did this, I schlepped that. You can go to the rental houses and get familiar with the equipment there, have someone show you what parts are, ask questions.

Success depends on training, experience, tenacity, the willingness to stick things out if you really want to do what you claim you want to do. It takes time and an understanding of what the role of the camera department is. It's not glamorous, at least initially. It's a lot of hard physical work and, depending on where you are, it's also draining as far as concentration goes, especially when you become a first assistant. That takes a lot of organization.

I was interested in anything technical that had to do with lights, film, camera movement, telling a story that way.

Have you experienced racism or sexism?

I'm aware it exists. All I have to do is be strong and secure within myself and keep moving forward. I've been blocked for various reasons. Sometimes I think it's more of an issue of being a woman than my color. The color comes in because I stick out. There are people who work with me because they appreciate my skills, my personality and what I have to contribute to the camera department. Then there are people who refuse to work with women, or have [other] issues. I may not work with them, but frankly I don't want to work with people who have those attitudes. The only reason minorities are working is that stories are changing. More blacks above the line are noticing all-white crews and starting to make comments.

It's a very closed, specialized field. I want to be hired on my skills. Since I've been in L.A., I've met more blacks working in camera, electric or grip, who are actually doing things.

I'm developing my skills, that's the bottom line. I'm here to grow and develop my skills, not be hung up on whether this person is going to hire me because I'm a woman or I'm a black woman. I'm doing what I need to do for myself.

What changes would you like to see?

The only way there will be changes is when you strip down a lot of sexist, racist attitudes. I wish women were more supportive of

other women. That [can be] a problem. Some women carry a lot of the same sexist attitudes that men dish out. They don't even like themselves as women, and they play to that around men. I wish women would be more supportive of women and African Americans would be more supportive of African Americans and play mentoring and teaching roles in bringing others up. That's the only way any of us are going to survive. I think that's true in almost everything. We're going to have to nurture and take care of one another.

Interview by Elfrieda Abbe, first appeared in Angles, Volume 4, Number 4, 1995. ©1995 Elfrieda Abbe

Michelle Crenshaw has worked on music videos, features and independent productions. Her DP credits include the documentary *Mud Poole*, directed by Shuli Eshel, *Odds and Ends* directed by Michelle Parkerson, *Creation Destiny* directed by Christina Springer. Her credits as first AC include the Emmy-winning television drama *NYPD Blue* and the feature films *Love Jones*, *The Cable Guy*, *Home Alone*, *Grumpier Old Men*. She also was DP for *Homecoming ... Sometimes I am Haunted by Memories of Dirt and Clay*, the story of African-American land loss and a chronicle of black farmers from the Civil War to present. The film was produced and directed by Charlene Gilbert.

History Dorothy Arzner



DOROTHY ARZNER was one of the only female directors in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s. She began her career as an editor and worked on such films as *Blood and Sand*, a Rudolph Valentino film directed by Fred Niblo (1922). She directed films at Paramount, RKO, Columbia and MGM and was credited with advancing the careers of such stars as Katharine Hepburn and Lucille Ball.

Hepburn plays a high-spirited, independent aviator in

Christopher Strong (1933) and Ball is a showgirl in *Dance, Girl Dance* (1940). Both films have attracted critical attention for their feminist themes.

Arzner's other works include *The Wild Party* (1929), *Working Girls* (1931), *Merrily We Go to Hell* (1932), *Craig's Wife* (1936), *The Bride Wore Red* (1937) and *First Comes Courage* (1943).

After she retired she wrote and taught filmmaking.

—*From Women in Film: An International Guide*, edited by Annette Kuhn and Susannah Radstone



T In PRAISE of Transgressors

IN ARGENTINE DIRECTOR MARIA LUISA BEMBERG'S *Camila* (1984), a young woman from an upper class family commits a forbidden act when she falls in love and elopes with a parish priest. Subsequently, the two are hunted down and executed. In one scene of this melodrama, set in the 19th century, Camila's mother is the only one courageous enough to speak out against the injustice and cruelty of their fate. With this scene, Bemberg alludes to the brave Argentine mothers who were the first to speak out against a military regime that had murdered or tortured their sons and daughters in the 1980s.

Camila is an example of how Bemberg, an internationally renowned director who died in 1995, takes a specific story or circumstance and relates it to a broader social concern. Personal and social repression, transgression and liberty are recurring themes that run through her work. Her 1991 film, *I Don't Want to Talk About It/ De eso no se habla*, like earlier works, centers on an intelligent, rebellious woman who breaks away from a repressive environment. Based on a short story by Julio Llinas, it's the first film she directed using another writer's material.

Charlotte, played by Alejandra Podesta, is an engaging young woman with a distinctive physical characteristic. Her domineering mother doesn't allow anyone to mention that her daughter is a dwarf. In fact, the mother terrorizes the entire town into silence. Marcello Mastroianni is a worldly older man who falls in love with the charming Charlotte and marries her, but the independent Charlotte finds her protective environment in this little seaside town stifling and seeks her own destiny. Bemberg's leading women—like Charlotte—are rebellious and courageous, ready to break the rules for personal freedom. There's a bit of Bemberg in all her characters. Her own rebellion began when she started making films at age 58. She had divorced her husband after raising four children and pursued filmmaking as a way to express her concerns.

You asked that we not talk about the physical characteristics that make Charlotte, the central character in *I Don't Want to Talk About It* distinctive. Why not?

I notice that people who go to see the film not knowing anything about Charlotte enjoy it much more. I can tell you it's a tale more than a story. It begins ... Once upon a time in far away Argentina, in the '30s, in an invented town by the water there lived a little girl ... It happens before television, before psychoanalysis, before Perónism, and, of course, before feminism. It's my favorite film because it has so many readings—it's a love story, it has humor, it has poetry, drama, passion. It's my most difficult film because it's a very risky subject. For Charlotte, reality and fiction crisscross. For me Charlotte's decision at the end of the movie is an act of freedom, of assuming her own identity. But really the last line of the film is written by each spectator.

You've said that individual rights—the right to be yourself, the right to be different—is one of your obsessions.

There's a wonderful phrase in one of Walt Whitman's poems. I read it in Spanish; I don't know how it goes in English—"May nothing exterior rule in me"—something like that. Not to be influenced, not to be manipulated, not to be told what you have to do. I'm taking that to extreme with *I Don't Want to Talk About It*.

How much of your own experiences are reflected in your work?

Everything, I guess. One's work is the result of one's education, influences, pressures and cultural connotations. But the work is

Like her other films, Maria Luisa Bemberg's *I Don't Want To Talk About It* (above) focuses on a woman who breaks away from a repressive environment.

never autobiographical. I can't imagine anything more boring than talking about myself. But it comes from me. In a way they are very personal films. I remember a phrase from [Robert] Bresson. He said, "Tell a story only you can tell," a personalized outlook of something. If it's to say something many other people can say just as beautifully or better, then I'm not very interested. What I like is to change the angle of the camera, have my own personal outlook which is not the mainstream.

How did you start making films?

In the first place, I like to believe I'm a good example for older people to realize it's never too late to begin something. I began when I was 58. But I think I was always a filmmaker since childhood. I wrote stories, which were illustrated with little close-ups and words underneath dialogues. They were my first storyboards. I used to improvise with puppets. I used to direct my sister and cousins in plays. But I think like many women of my generation, I didn't take myself seriously. I never thought or imagined that what a woman might have to say would be important. When I decided to make movies, without having a clue whether I could make them or not, I knew I was going to displease many people around me. I knew I was risking breaking my neck, and off I went.

Was there any one thing that helped you make that leap? To change your life?

There were many things. One was the reading of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. She expressed beautifully what I felt but didn't know how to analyze. Another book that opened a lot of doors in me was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. That and a thought of [Andre] Malraux, which says one has to live out one's ideas. So I said, "I'm not living out my ideas. I'm just bitching and boring everyone. Do something about it." So I wrote a short play I felt could make a good movie. I wrote the script and participated in the shooting of the film. It was autobiographical, *Chronicles of a Lady/Cronica de una Senora*, for director Raul de la Torre. When I got to the cinema set I was riveted. I felt this is what I like, this is where I belong. I was caught from then on.

As a scriptwriter, I realized it's absolutely impossible for any man to understand the new awareness of women even if they want to be understanding.

It's never the same. Then I decided if I really want films to express what I'm writing, I will just have to go behind the camera. I began for ideological reasons, political reasons. I was sick of seeing the derogatory images of women on the screen, mostly made by men—not all of them, of course. There are marvelous exceptions. But generally women are pretty boring. They always have the second role, the gags. My idea was to have leading women characters. They would be assertive. They would be strong. They would be transgressors. They would be free. I got more loosened up doing these images until I finished my last film—*I, the Worst of All*, about this fabulous Mexican poet and nun. I can't think of a better role model for women. I wanted to find a true, personal voice.

You've said that if women make movies the way men do, they might as well stay home. Could you elaborate on that?

Of course, I think it's desirable that if women make movies they try and help bring changes so necessary to end the patriarchal society and to have an egalitarian society in which men and women come to terms with each other, where men would not be abusing women and exploiting them, and women would not be exploiting men and trying to get money out of them. It would be something a bit more decent and respectful of each other.

Do you consider yourself a feminist?

By all means. I think any woman who says she's not a feminist is either a coward or a fool. I wouldn't be giving you this interview if we hadn't had these consciousness-raising groups in which we all helped each other to grow. We all shared the same kind of problems. That insecurity was the dragon we had to kill within ourselves, if we wanted to be ourselves. It's just the beginning. It's just a drop into the sea. You can't change millions of years in 20 years. But I don't militate any longer. The best way for me to be a good feminist is to make good movies.

What are the most important issues for you now?

My most important issue is to make another movie, then another one. I have a couple of ideas. My life is very quiet now. I'm conscious of my priorities. I'm not a young woman anymore and I'm very cautious with the energy I spend. I know the price of being free is to be solitary. Now my top priority, apart from my family, is to tell stories. At this time in my life, I'm no longer interested in seducing people. I want to convince them.

Interview by Elfrieda Abbe, first appeared in Angles, Volume 2, Number 3, 1994. ©1994 Elfrieda Abbe

Filmography

Moments/Momentos (1981), about a woman's adulterous affair.

Camila (1984), Maria Luisa Bemberg's most commercially successful film in the United States and Argentina, is based on a true story of a young woman from an upper class family who elopes with a priest.

Miss Mary (1986), with Julie Christie, reflects Bemberg's upbringing in an upper-class family. The tableaux of life among the wealthy in the 1930s comments on a stagnant patriarchal society and the arrogance that led to Perónist politics.

I, the Worst of All/Yo la mas pobre de todas (1989), tells the story of the 17th century Mexican nun and poet Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz.

an independent Spirit

IN 1957, ROSALIE K. FRY wrote and illustrated *Secret of Ron Mor Skerry*, a charming children's book about a little girl who is determined to uncover a family mystery.

Nearly forty years later, long after Fry's book was out of print, Sarah Green and Maggie Renzi produced John Sayles' *The Secret of Roan Inish*, based on her book. The women had previously worked together on Sayles' *City of Hope* and *Passion Fish*.

The *Secret of Roan Inish* is a fairy tale told in a realistic manner. It tells of an Irish girl living with her grandparents in a coastal town who investigates the mysterious disappearance of her baby brother. The story revolves around the Celtic legend of Selkies, mythical creatures that are half human, half seal.

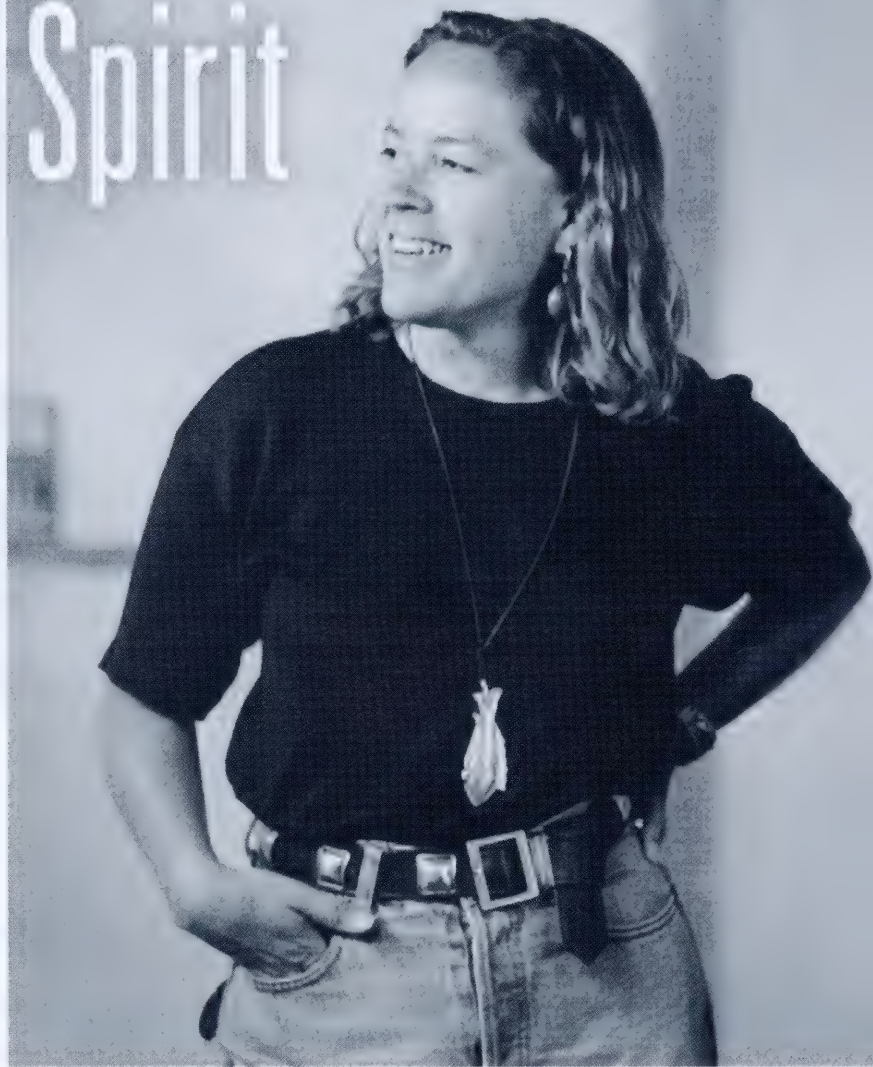
Producing *The Secret of Roan Inish* presented new challenges to Green. Her job entailed everything from finding the author, to figuring out how to depict the seals that are so important in the story, to working with special effects, to scouting for a location. Green's development as a producer evolved over several years. She took her first film course when she was an engineering student and changed her major soon after that experience. After getting a degree in film, she went to New York where she worked in distribution for Debra Franco, a maker of educational films. At the same time, she volunteered to work on other movies so she could learn a variety of jobs. She worked as an electrician and sound person before taking a production job on an independent film.

"I liked the combination of things—the fact that it was working with people first and foremost and dealing with crew relations. It was also dealing with money and all the logistics that I was fairly good at. From that, I started production managing small pictures," she said.

One of her mentors was producer Peggy Rajski, who produced Jodie Foster's *Home for the Holidays*. Rajski was developing *Matewan* with Maggie Renzi, her partner at the time, and asked Green to be her assistant on that job.

"She needed a strong production person behind her. I knew what I needed to learn, and I could do it with Peggy. So I did that with her, and I kept production managing."

Among Green's projects were several segments of *Voices and Visions*, the American Playhouse series about American poets. Green continued to work on Sayles' projects as well. She was assistant production manager on *Eight Men Out*. When Rajski and Renzi went separate ways, Green and Renzi became producing partners for *Passion Fish* and *City of Hope*. Green also produced David Mamet's *Oleanna*. Other credits include *A Thousand Pieces of Gold* and the American Playhouse production *Andre's Mother*.



Sarah Green worked with Maggie Renzi and John Sayles on *The Secret of Roan Inish*

How did Peggy Rajski's mentoring help you?

Part of it is simply systems—that there are systems for things. She taught me basic things like how to break down a script and how to structure a budget. A very important thing I learned from her was to never try to do a budget without breaking down the script and scheduling it because you can't begin to guess what you're going to need until you do that process. It was a lot of practical things.

Describe your collaboration with Maggie Renzi.

Our jobs were far more distinct when we began, but since then we've learned a lot from each other, and they overlap even more.

I tend to do more of the day-to-day line producing kinds of things because that's my background. When John writes a screenplay, I schedule it and budget it. I figure out a structure for it. We tend to do the crew together. Maggie is more involved with the casting because she lives with John—she certainly has his ear in a more direct fashion. She does a lot of supporting of him and translating of what he needs. She knows what's going wrong or what's going right. She's his voice in a lot of ways.



Sarah Green co-produced *A Thousand Pieces of Gold*

What's involved in line production?

In a lot of bigger pictures, the producers are just putting the deal together, or they're creative producers and working closely with the directors, whereas a line producer is often someone they hire just to run the day-to-day business. It's a hired gun. We keep it small enough that we don't hire someone outside to do that. I cover that as well as my producing responsibilities.

Could you go through what you did on *Roan Inish*?

It began quite a long time ago. Maggie read Rosalie K. Fry's book when she was a kid, and the book always stayed in her mind. John agreed to do it after we did *Passion Fish*. She showed it to me when we finished *City of Hope*. I read it and fell in love with it as much as she had. It spoke to me at a very spiritual level about our connection with nature and animals.

The first thing we needed to do was find Rosalie and get the rights to the book. That was something I did. It was quite a lengthy process. She'd written the book forty years ago. Publishers no longer even had her contracts on file. Nobody knew where to find her. Eventually after months and months of searching, close to a year, I found her through the British Society of Authors. I wrote to her, and she wrote back. We started this delightful correspondence that went on for quite some time. I talked about who we were, about the book and how we loved it. She was delighted. She hadn't been writing in years. She was elderly and was quite happy about the whole idea. Once we found her, it was a fairly straightforward process to buy the rights.

There was a lot involved with the movie that neither Maggie nor I had done before. We hadn't done special effects, we hadn't worked with animals. We sat down and wondered, "How are we going to do the seals? Are they wild? Are they live? Are they puppets?"

I went to meet with some people who had trained sea lions

in Brooklyn or Long Island and started to get an idea about what kind of seals were more trainable and workable, what the differences between seals and sea lions were, and why most people use trained sea lions.

At the same time, we were thinking about where to shoot it. Maggie always wanted to shoot it in Ireland. She had traveled there before, and it stuck in her mind as the place this story would be based. In fact, the story was based in Scotland but there was a part of Ireland that matched the Scottish shore. I took a trip over there—half scouting trip and half pleasure trip—and started to look for where we might do it and how it might work.

I started meeting people in Dublin—production manager and casting people. I had a little more information about how things worked there, about how things are different, how the feature crews are structured somewhat differently and all that. So that began the process of where and how.

How did you decide on the location?

We just hit every little crevice on the ocean. Every time we saw a turn off toward the water, we'd go down it and see what that bit of coastline looked like. The further north we got the more right it felt. Finally we found this little town that seemed like the exact idea of the script. There was a little island with these beautiful ruins on it that looked like people had lived there in the '50s. It was perfect. Then we realized it was really foolish to shoot on a real island. But once we had that place in mind, we started looking around there, and we found a little cove you could frame to look quite like an island.

Also, I had an Irish production manager do the first round of a budget at that time to get an idea of how someone there would structure it—for everything: what it would cost to pay everyone, to feed them, for costumes, for boats, for the animals. You have to put this all into one big production budget.

How did the financing work?

We had the rights, we started looking around and talking to people who would be interested in this. Our executive producer John Sloss, who is also our attorney, started sending it around to some of the distributors we thought might be interested.

Do you look to distributors for financing?

We looked in all directions because you don't know where the best deal will be at any given moment. We had been quite successful in our last two films by selling off only a small amount of the rights and getting an equity investment from that same group, and holding all other rights until the film was done. That way we were able to make a good deal based on a finished product, and it was much less risk for the distributor. But sometimes you need to sell off distribution rights. That's just the way it works sometimes. We looked in all directions. Ultimately we financed it through equity investment. We didn't sell off any rights.

What happened after the movie was done?

We started to put out the word that it was done and available. We didn't show it until it was completed because we wanted it to be totally John's vision and done as he wanted it. We started having screenings for distributors, getting people to see it, and having meetings. Basically talking about what people might want to do with it. That process took a little time. Then we started talking to people interested in it and seeing who made a reasonable offer and understood the film. It's not a formula film. It doesn't fit any classic distribution formula. Therefore, it needed someone who really understood it and liked it enough to figure out what it was going to take.

What are you looking for in a distributor?

It's tricky. There are several things in a distribution deal you're looking for. You're looking at what the advance is going to be. You're looking for how they are going to distribute it. You're looking for what the profit split is after they recoup. And obviously, you want a big advance because you may or may not see more money.

But you also want to know that the film is going to get to a lot of people, and the biggest advance isn't necessarily the one who is going to carefully wind it through that distribution path. The bigger the distribution organization, the more likely they are going to depend on the first weekend's grosses to see how it's going to do, and that's going to seriously affect how much money and attention they are going to put into it after that. Whereas for someone smaller, it's more of a risk for them to take on a film, and they're likely to distribute it with more care and finesse. It matters a lot because, obviously, the film's profit has to do with how many people see the film. But also, we make films for a reason—they say something. We want someone who isn't going to try to get the biggest money and the fastest pitch and throw that away.

What did you like about First Look Pictures Releasing?

They had this fellow who heads the distribution department. He loved the film, which was great. He understood it was going to take some thought and care, and he was able to do that. He came to us and started to put out some ideas. He was willing to listen to ours. He was just somebody who was a careful, smart thinker.

What's the ideal situation for distribution?

I think any film needs word of mouth. Some films are easier to plug into the standard distribution marketing plan. Something like an Arnold Schwarzenegger film, you just tell everyone that's who is in it, and you do an action trailer. Everyone knows if you like that kind of movie, you want to go see it, whereas this isn't necessarily the kind of movie that everyone knows about. There's no identifiable American stars. It's not a simplistic kids' movie but it's still appealing to kids. So how do you get those kids there? It appeals to adults, but it's about a kid. The main character is ten. How do you get the adults in there? It takes someone to look at what's special about the story and appealing, to find a way to tell everybody that's why they want to see it.

What strategy works best with independents such as Sayles?

To distribute a John Sayles film, one typical way it works is to hone in on the John Sayles audience, who you know is going to come. Then it's a matter of who else is interested in this film. For instance, with *City of Hope*—how do we get people who are in city politics? How do we get people interested in race relations to see this? You start to think to yourself, "Who are the people who are going to get other people in there? City workers?" Everyone we talked to about that movie would say, "Oh, something like this happened in my city."



Fiona never loses faith. She trusts her connections. She trusts what she knows. As adults, we forget that. We forget to listen to our intuition, our inner selves.

Do you see *Roan Inish* as a different kind of project for John Sayles?

Yes and no. I actually think if you look at his films, they are all pretty different. They are all about different things, and they are structured differently. They have to do with what he's interested in at the time thematically and cinematically. In *City of Hope*, he had these very strong political issues he was thinking about, but he was also thinking about how to structure a film that was very immediate and did this kind of camera style he was interested in.

He's never done a kids' film before. But if you look at his other themes, he had never done them, either. One of the themes he's always been interested in is how people get along, and what it means to be in community. This film has as much to do with that as any of them. It has to do with finding where you belong.

How would you describe your community in terms of working with Sayles and Renzi?

I love working with these guys. I think John's one of the smartest men I know. I think he's an incredible observer of people, which is one of the reasons he's so good at dialogue and how people say what they say. I think it's a great talent a lot of people don't have. People don't tend to listen to each other all that much. I really value that John listens as well as he does and gives back to us.

City of Hope is a great example because I read the script and I thought, "Wow, this is pretty dark." I had one opinion about it, and as I worked on that film, I started to have more opinions about it. As we were editing it or fixing the color or doing the video transfer, I'd see it again and again. Each time I appreciated it more and more and realized how many levels it worked on and how many ways it was speaking to me. I love that John challenges you when you're watching his movies. He gives you so much to think about. It's a complex experience.

Why do you choose to work on the East Coast?

I kind of like this corner of the film business we've managed to carve out. We don't necessarily have to go live in Hollywood and be in high-powered meetings all the time. We make our little movies and have our lives.

Describe independent filmmaking in New York.

The fact that New York isn't Hollywood in some ways relieves the pressure to make being commercial your most important criteria. When you're in the big [budget] leagues, you know the film has to make a lot of money so you can make another one. Whereas, if you think about what the market can bear for a film, or you think about how to make a film that isn't going to cost anyone that much money, then it frees you. You get to do a little more with it. You don't have to earn back millions in order to be a success. So I think it allows you more freedom. In some ways, that's characteristic of the New York independent scene. For some—not all—keeping it smaller, making the financial risk less, means they can risk more in how they can tell their story or what story they tell.

What are the difficulties in financing independent films?

There's so much at stake in the film business. Independent films are tougher because there's no automatic sell, no big stars, because you can't afford them. Or no big splashy effects. You need a story or an image or an idea that is going to appeal to people. It's tougher but as long as your film speaks to more than you, there's a market for it. You just can't come up with an idea that's so expensive that you can't do it within a modest structure.

For you, what was the most appealing thing about *Roan Inish*?

The thing that spoke to me was this little girl, Fiona, who knows from the first scene when she sees the seal that it looks at her, and they've communicated. They communicate again and she learns about her family and this mystery she's trying to solve. She never loses faith. She doesn't question that connection. I think as kids we're very connected to spirit. Even though adults tell her she didn't see this seal, she's tough and she stands by herself. I love that about her. She trusts her connections. She trusts what she knows. As adults I think we forget that. We forget to listen to our intuition or our inner selves.

Compiled from conversations with Sarah Green at the Toronto International Film Festival and in follow-up interviews. Interviewed by Elfrieda Abbe for Angles, Volume 3, Number 1, 1995. © 1995 Elfrieda Abbe

Sarah Green is based in New York, dividing her time between Manhattan and Gloucester, Massachusetts, where she lives.

Filmography

Thousand Pieces of Gold (1990), co-producer.

City of Hope (1991), producer.

Passion Fish (1992), producer.

The Secret of Roan Inish (1994), producer.

Oleanna (1994), producer.

American Buffalo (1996), co-producer.

The Spanish Prisoner (1997), co-producer.

The Winslow Boy (1999), producer.

Girlfight (2000), producer.

State and Main (2002), producer.

Frida (2002), producer.

CHOREOGRAPHER plays with TIME & SPACE

BY LAURI ROSE TANNER

NURIA OLIVÉ-BELLÉS was born in Barcelona, Spain in 1957. She studied dance at the Institut del Teatre de Barcelona, where she received a degree in Contemporary Dance in 1984. In 1986, she was given a grant to study dance and video at the Merce Cunningham School in New York, where she resided for six years. During this period she was invited to perform and choreograph at the American Dance Festival for two consecutive years. She was also commissioned to perform her work at The Kitchen Dance Theatre Workshop, Performance Space 122, DIA Center for the Arts and elsewhere.

Later she studied Film Directing at the School of Visual Arts in New York. In 1989 and 1990, Olivé-Bellés was invited by the Sundance Film Institute to participate in the Choreographers and Filmmakers Program, sponsored by Robert Redford and directed by Stanley Donen, Michael Kidd and Eliot Caplan. During this time, she was assistant director to Caplan and studied directing at the Actors Studio with Arthur Penn.

Her 1994 37-minute, 16mm film *Alicia Was Fainting* is a coming-of-age story about a 14-year-old girl who questions what society has prepared for her as a woman.

The film won the School of Visual Arts Dusty Awards for Best Film, Best Director and Best Editor. *Alicia Was Fainting* received its World Premiere at the 18th San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival and was screened at many other U.S. and international festivals and venues.

Nuria Olivé-Bellés' *Alicia Was Fainting* is a coming-of-age story about a 14-year-old who questions what society expects of her as a woman.



Please talk about your background. Did you start by studying dance?

I started working when I was 14. My family didn't have enough money to send me to school, and at that time they thought it better if I built up a profession so that I could make some money right away and take care of myself. So I worked at different things—in a butcher shop, selling records, and baking bread. I always was fascinated with gymnastics because people do these incredible things with their bodies. I felt like it was an incredible freedom. I was able to put some money together and take some gymnastic classes. From that I got in contact with movement, improvisation and dance.

Did you study choreography formally?

Not formally. I felt like my body wasn't trained for ballet, and I wasn't sure that I was going to be able to be a dancer, but I had the need of expressing myself. I wanted to create and put on the stage or show to other people how I thought and felt.

How do you compare film and dance, and how did you start to think of merging them?

I know now that somehow film gives me more tools to work with, to create that intimacy with the audience. I like the fact that

you can travel in time and space, and in film you can go from an ordinary moment to a very unconscious and perceptive moment. In dance I feel like that's more difficult, it's a little bit more far away, and not so direct. A good dance performance can also do it, but I don't think that it happens that often, where you can merge your unconscious, your dreams, your fantasies, traveling through many different places. I think that films work more like the unconscious in the internal world of a person than dance does.

Were you exposed to video and dance performances in Spain or Europe before you went to New York?

Yes, I had a friend whom I gave one of my dance works to, and she had been in the U.S. She came back and did multimedia work with video and dance. On the other hand, I always liked photography. My father worked in photography, developing film for magazines. It was still photography, and he used to bring all these books from his work with pictures of places that I'd never been, very far away. Those images made me dream. With images you can keep them, and you can look at them again and remember times that have passed.

Do you feel that's also possible with film or video?

Oh yes, like in my film *Alicia Was Fainting*—when I dance in that piece, I have a couple of sections that were from a solo I did on the stage, which I re-adapted for the film. The concept of being able to freeze time is also something I like a lot in film. It's so interesting when you perform and then have a record, but that record is not real in a way. When you do something for the stage, it's for the stage, and when you transpose it to film or video you have to re-adapt it if you want to really get the same feelings.

You studied dance and video at the Merce Cunningham School in New York. How did you make the transition of going from video to film?

I was used to seeing a film like a big screen where everything involves you, and video was more like "the little TV." I took technical dancing classes at Merce Cunningham, but they don't have classes in video dance, so they couldn't really teach me. As a choreographer, in my unconscious, I wanted to be a film director, and not only record dance. Little by little, I worked with Merce Cunningham's film director, Eliot Caplan; he also was working in video and film dance. I was his assistant for two years. I really started liking the idea of film and the craft of filmmaking.

Do you identify yourself as a Spanish or Basque filmmaker or feel that you are part of a group?

Yes, I feel that my background, being born in Barcelona, is like everybody who grows up in a certain place. You carry that within yourself. I generally don't care if filmmakers are Basque or Catalan, or from Madrid, America or France. I used to see more Spanish filmmakers, and of those, I like Buñuel a lot. For me, he's a master of the unconscious and dream world. I like the irony, the sweet and bitter themes of Almodovar, and I love Victor Erice. He takes a long time to make his films, and he puts all his love into it—he's amazing. He did films when Franco still was alive, and he always had problems getting money, but his films are really wonderful.



Nuria Olivé-Bellés

What was the purpose of the Sundance Choreographers and Filmmakers Workshop? Are they still doing them?

No, it's really a pity that they are not doing it because, as I said, there is no place generally for these studies. The purpose was that the choreographers would direct, and they would have the opportunity to find out how it all works, such as telling the cameraman the angles and creating the structure, going from stage to film to the frame, and mostly it was the opportunity of experimenting and learning. There were also editors who edited the work. It was just an unbelievable opportunity.

Would you like to try to create another type of program like this someday?

I think what I really would like to do is direct films again, but I have to fight with my dreams for that. When you come out of school, it's a whole different story. I went to the School of Visual Arts in New York, and I did a BFA in film directing with a focus in editing. Editing is very connected to dance and the rhythm of choreography. You feel that you are choreographing as you are cutting. By what you choose and how you arrange it, how you put it, you can make so many different films. And it's so direct with the film itself, you touch the film and you end up sweating. The film starts getting foggy from your fingers and greasy, and it's similar to when you are sweating in dancing! Filmmaking is very physical, and it's directly connected to your emotions and your body, but mostly the rhythm and the timing. You have to have an incredible sense of timing because one shot too long or too short means something so different. You have to choreograph and orchestrate those tempos, and the timing has to be related to the emotion that the film is talking about.

At the School of Visual Arts in '92 you made a film called *The Fight*. Could you talk about that?

It's a short film, 8-minutes long, and was picked up right away for distribution by Frameline. It is related to dance because it's a silent film. I believe that silent films and choreography are almost the same. It's another moment in which dance and choreography

Editing is very connected to dance and the rhythm of choreography. You are choreographing as you are cutting. By what you choose and how you arrange it, you can make so many different films.

are completely related to film because you are just using camera movement and bodies moving in the space. I wanted to make a film in which I could explore the connection between dance and film, but I didn't want to do something that was a pure piece of dance. I'm more interested in the human side of movement that you can relate to, which has to do with theater. The idea for *The Fight* came from the time during which America was in the Gulf War. The turnaround of this film shows how it's so difficult to accept love between two men—it's like everybody prefers them to fight than to love each other.

The theme was of two gay men and the conflict about the war?

When I did it there were two men, but it has many different levels. One theme is [what it means] being a man. We don't know if they are heterosexual or homosexual, and they are fighting. We see how the audience will react when they kiss, whether they will prefer them to keep on fighting, or to keep on kissing. I want the audience to confront that. It was also about how much we have to hurt each other before we can accept and love each other. And yes, it is about the gay world as much as about not accepting love.

Is *Alicia Was Fainting* autobiographical?

I was a little bit afraid of the work initially, but I'm a storyteller, my life is very rich. I have imagination and ideas. At the beginning, I always work with ideas that come to me in my dance work that I need to express. Then I thought that I didn't ever see films about 14 year-old girls, about that time in which you are not a woman, but not a child, about that time when you feel kind of lonely and scared, and nobody is telling you how things work, and you have to try to find out. I thought that the subject has not been explored that much. I also wanted to frame it in a time in which the prime character will just have questions, and not answers. I remember that for me, that time was full of separation, which was a subject that also interested me.

Separation in what sense? By leaving school and going to work, that kind of thing?

Separation on all levels, and also it's a film about losing the people around you, about losing your own mother. I was 14 when my mother died, very autobiographical. I wasn't going to include it in the film because I didn't want to make a "self-pity" kind of film, something self-indulgent, but then my advisor told me that the idea of being motherless is also universal in the sense that even if still you have a mother, you can also sometimes feel motherless.

It was interesting for me to investigate that idea of why sometimes the mother has a hard time passing information to a young girl. I don't think that happens so much with men. It's very clear what they're supposed to do, but a woman is left quite alone. I wonder if somehow we are afraid of telling what we are supposed to be. It's the survival thing, because if you are not what you are supposed to be, then you are going to be hit and very hard. Maybe no mother wants to say anything about this to her daughter.

To be a filmmaker and put this information in a recorded form that can be exposed many times to many people is a very powerful statement against that secrecy and fear. How was it to direct yourself, playing a main character in your film?

It was great, I like to perform in my films, but there has to be a reason for it, something that I could do; otherwise, if there's not a reason, then I prefer to be out of it. In *Alicia*, I'm playing the role of my own mother, so it was very interesting when I saw it. It was very beautiful, because when she died, I wanted to tell her how much I loved her, and wanted to hear from her how much she loved me, but she died and I couldn't gratify that. So through this dance in the film, I felt that I was telling her and she was telling me, and we both said that we loved each other.

You expressed the dream to do works that speak to many audiences and not just to limited constituencies, such as gay audiences only. What areas are you interested in?

I am more interested in the things that are kept silent, interested in the inside, individuals, relationships with others, relationships with the world.

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Nuria Olivé-Bellés is a choreographer-filmmaker who now lives in Spain. She was the editor for the documentary Holland Ave. Boys Success Story (1996).

Lauri Rose Tanner is a film festival consultant based in San Francisco and the author of How to Start and Operate Film & Video Festivals and How to Manage and Operate Film & Video Festivals. She is an advisor to the San Francisco Film & Video Arts Commission. Her interest in Spanish and Latin American film came from living in Central America and Mexico in the 1980s.

Portrait OF A Puerto Rican

FRANCES NEGRÓN-MUNTANER began making films when she was ten years old and her grandfather gave her an 8mm camera. Brought up in a middle class suburb of San Juan, Negrón-Muntaner organized neighborhood kids to create television shows. Her models were programs such as *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Bewitched* and *The Addams Family*.

"I began to imitate TV not as a passive little girl but as an outgoing tomboy," she says in the narration for her video piece, *Puerto Rican ID*, which ran on the PBS special *Signal to Noise*. The image on the screen is Negrón-Muntaner, around ten years old, turning directly toward the camera, pointing an imaginary gun at the viewer as if she were in *Mission Impossible* or a James Bond movie. Later, she would be pointing a camera in search of images.

In *Puerto Rican ID*, Negrón-Muntaner talks about the way commercial television influenced her as she was growing up, noting that she identified with the affluent, white American families on television more than the characters portrayed in Puerto Rican programs. She points out that while she was watching these shows, thousands of Puerto Ricans were leaving the island for jobs in the North because of economic conditions. "I never noticed or was aware of this," says Negrón-Muntaner. "At the center of my ignorance, dubbed in Spanish, American TV spoke to me."

But even as a youngster there was something subversive in her choices. "I identified with characters who had magic powers or were super aliens, such as those on *The Addams Family* or *Star Trek*. They allowed me to question the values of suburban life. But their enchanting solutions offered few weapons in the world I was about to face," she says. At nineteen, when Negrón-Muntaner arrived in Philadelphia to study visual anthropology and fine arts at Temple University, her self-image as a "middle class student was shattered" as she confronted a whole other set of images and words applied to Puerto Ricans: "shady, reckless, poor, dangerous,

Negrón-Muntaner focuses on the complexity of identity.



JAMES WASSERMAN

criminal, savage." On television and in the movies she saw images of Puerto Ricans being arrested or derided. Often they were shown as poor and uneducated.

"In the tide of these words," she says in *Puerto Rican ID*, "I lost who I was but gained a new destiny. I turned the TV off in search of an image I'd never seen but knew existed."

What we don't see is as significant as what we do see. What is missing, she says, is a public forum of discussion of the full range of Puerto Rican social, cultural and political practices.

"What does it mean to be Puerto Rican in its diversity? In the barrio, outside the barrio, light-skinned, dark-skinned, middle class, working class, straight, queer. In a way, the whole identity discourse completely swallows up all those differences, making all Puerto Ricans a blur of stereotypes and predigested assumptions," she says.

The discussion of all aspects of identity and what it means are inherent in Negrón-Muntaner's work, whether it's straightforward documentary, experimental or narrative.

Her first piece, *AIDS in the Barrio*, co-produced with Peter Biella, is a street-smart documentary made in the Latino community where people on the street, as opposed to "experts," talk about sex and AIDS. It won the Gold Award (Community Health) at the John Muir Medical Film Festival in 1990 and is a standard media tool used in educating Latinos about AIDS.

Brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican (1994) addresses the complexities and pitfalls of identity politics. *Brincando el charco*, literally meaning to cross the puddle, is an expression used to describe emigration.

Negrón-Muntaner plays the central character in the film, a Puerto Rican photographer who lives with her lover in the States and is called back to the island after her father dies. The filmmaker uses both narrative and documentary forms to achieve a complex layering of issues concerning color, class and sexuality along with the intricacies of daily life and relationships, including the straightforward portrayal of the central lesbian couple. In several documentary-like segments, men and women discuss their feelings about “home” and their identities as Puerto Ricans. The insights and observations of these very different individuals underscore the difficulties in pinning identity down to race, gender, ethnicity or sexuality. Negrón-Muntaner smartly brings in other components, such as class, education and skin color. Central to the discussion are universal questions: Can you go home again? and what is home?

More meditative than conclusive, the piece is open-ended, suggesting that identity is always shifting.

Negrón-Muntaner often writes about the process of filmmaking and what it reveals to her. She has a masters degree in Visual Anthropology and Fine Arts from Temple University and is working on her doctorate in Comparative Literature at Rutgers University. Her other works include the following:

Staying in School Is Cool, a video made in collaboration with Congreso de Latinos Unidos, features a group of 14-year-old participants in the Congreso’s after-school program. She combines music video segments with testimony and fictional vignettes expressing teen fears and aspirations.

Homeless Diaries is a video journey into Tent City, a camp built by homeless organizers and homeless people on an empty Philadelphia lot in 1995. Negrón-Muntaner interweaves video, home movies, images of children living in Tent City and mainstream coverage of the city. It’s a multilayered exploration of how different media represent displacement and social movements.

The Splendid Little War: Stories from the Spanish-American War and Its Aftermath (1898-1917). 1998 marks the 100th anniversary of the Spanish-American War. It was remembered by then Secretary of State John Hays as the “splendid little war,” and often referred to in academic circles as the “forgotten war.”

Negrón-Muntaner’s work examines the context and the enduring impact of the war. Unlike other major conflicts that reshaped the U.S., such as the Civil War, the Spanish-American War and the subsequent colonization of Guam, the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Cuba have been pushed outside the U.S. public sphere. The film attempts to foster understanding of the colonial past of the U.S., and how the war affected the histories of six countries and still informs relationships between the U.S. and the Pacific and Caribbean archipelagos.

As a writer and filmmaker, Negrón-Muntaner continues to challenge labels in her work. She is more interested in the idea that identity is complex, layered, contradictory and ever-changing. As a scholar she questions, deconstructs and analyzes screen representations—including her own—not only the images, but who made them, how they were made, the context in which they were made and how we view them. During a series of interviews beginning in 1995, she discussed these and other concerns.

Could you discuss in terms of anthropology and filmmaking what your concerns are about representation in your films?

Some people approach visual anthropology as the study of what people do with visual mediums, whether it’s a photo album or a Hollywood movie. Others approach it more as how you can produce media that is in some way anthropological—such as documenting people’s lives. Then there’s the whole question of what is anthropology or what should it be as a practice of political intervention in a community. For me a problem is that anthropology is rooted in this dichotomy between subject and object. I finished the anthropology program and went to the film program. Now I have an MVA and an MFA. Then, I got into the question of ethics or political questions related to the documentary form, to the documentary history and anthropological film history and became very critical of the ways of representing culture.

How do these questions apply to your making of *AIDS in the Barrio*?

In the process of producing *AIDS in the Barrio*, I came across some of these questions in the flesh. I’m definitely talking about a particular tradition of documentary, one I somewhat inherited. It had strong roots in the Civil Rights movement and in using the documentary form as a way to capture our reality, to speak for ourselves. That was the tradition that I was going to call upon. It seemed totally fitting that *AIDS in the Barrio* would use that realist aesthetic, and that it would borrow from other traditions I was familiar with, such as the Latin America New Cinema movement, a very strong political documentary genre.

What bothered me is that our dialogue with the people in the film was not on equal footing. Here they were being the object of a documentary, and here I was behind the camera asking them, “What do you think about this? What do you think about that?”

That was disturbing—that realization of power over another in a symbolic way—even as democratic as we tried to make the process. It was our film even if we did take measures to, for example, make it free and available to everybody who wanted it. We had all kinds of Latino professionals in the AIDS field watch it and give us feedback. Still, the experience was very disturbing to me. I was really young, too—twenty or twenty-one.

Another thing that impacted me, maybe even more, was that when the film was finished it was received at large by people outside the community as a “community” film. It made us

In a way the whole identity discourse completely swallows up all these differences making Puerto Ricans a blur of stereotypes and predigested assumptions.

spokespeople for the community. Here we were taking the voice of those people we had interviewed. That was the power inequity played out again. I felt there was no progress, that what we had done had not created a forum of discussion of what it meant to be Puerto Rican in its diversity.

That started my revolt against identity politics as a way of framing questions. I experimented with ways of getting out of that middle. I immediately did a no-budget video for a community organization, and I followed everything they told me to do. I did what they wanted me to do. When the piece was finished, it served their purposes. It was a piece that documented an AIDS quilt project that was going to tour hospitals, schools and so forth, to stimulate other people to make quilts.

It was community media to the extent that I was the facilitator of the media and not the generator of the media for my own artistic expression. But the result proved to me unsatisfying as well. It was what the community organization wanted to project, and what they wanted to do. I was fine because that was the purpose, but a lot of things that I wanted to point out were not part of the equation.

I began to see clearly that there were going to be two kinds of media that I was going to make. One was to make media-making accessible to a community that I felt a part of in some way—because the representational needs of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. are enormous, and that was a kind of activism or symbolic activism. The other was to use media to explore and experiment about questions I personally had.

How do you feel about AIDS in the Barrio now?

I feel ambivalent. I felt that the film represented the Puerto Rican community in Philadelphia, but it was a massive abstraction of that community. It's an imagined community. There are many different communities even within that geographic boundary of North Philly. Members of those different communities expressed that they were very happy with the film, that they felt for the first time in memory that they were respectfully represented and had a voice. So to that extent I felt that the film definitely did what it was supposed to do on a basic level which was to provide a tool that AIDS educators could use in order to provoke discussion about certain issues.

That didn't entirely erase the other problems I mentioned before. After the documentary was done, I wrote articles about the process of making the film and how it felt at different junctures of the process. That was a way of expelling my discomfort and making it part of the discussion about this kind of media. It's not to say that I disinherit the film. It was as important to talk about the process as it was to use the finished video in a particular context. I find that writing about the process is a very important part of it all for me. That's the only way I can navigate a problem.

When I'm forced to write about it, I see my own contradictions, ambiguities and gaps. I felt community media was not going to solve the problems for me. I mean those power inequity problems of framing subjects. Questions like: Who are Puerto Ricans? What do they do? Where do they come from? What do they look like? What are their problems? I didn't share those questions in the same way because I wasn't a Puerto Rican on welfare in North Philly. That was not my reality although I had an alliance in transforming that reality.

Aren't you dealing with these same issues in the narrative form with *Brincando el charco*?

To some extent *Brincando* was a way of reinventing myself as a filmmaker because the process was so much different. It was a much bigger project that included fiction and documentary forms. It was an exploration, a way for me to find a style, find a way to work.

Brincando began as an exploration of identities in the plural. I started by exploring issues that had to do with race in the Puerto Rican community. I narrowed it down. I didn't want to make universal statements about this. I just narrowed it down to my own experiences, which ultimately were superseded because my own attitudes and practices about sexuality and all kinds of other things changed during the making of the film. So the whole attempt to frame myself even as an autobiographical

subject, as a middle class, light-skinned Puerto Rican lesbian saw itself undone. In those five years, I couldn't even fix myself on the screen for even a very small limited amount of time. So how can I expect my identity narrative to be anything but rhetorical in the best sense of the word.

How does *Brincando* fit into the context of other Puerto Rican work?

Part of the problems I encountered in conceptualizing *Brincando* had to do with not having Puerto Rican models. I wasn't talking to anyone in particular. Whereas if you are a black filmmaker or gay filmmaker or trying to represent issues of sexuality you have context, you are referring to other people, other work. In our case, although we definitely have gay writers, actors, etc., there's no public discourse. In a way talking to gays outwardly would almost be outing them. It's not that we don't have a gay culture or context, but there are no previous open texts that you can refer to that are immediately picked up on.

I felt somewhat lonely. That changed, and it's going to continue to change. I wrote an article on Latino lesbian and gay filmmaking in the U.S. and found there was more film production in the last few years than ever before. This state of affairs is in constant flux and is changing for the better in diversity of representation, point of view.

American TV ignored who
I was, my language, culture,
history, but it informed who
I was going to be—at home
with American culture.

How did your ideas about these issues evolve?

Identity discourse is so rigid in many ways: what your identity is and what it isn't; what you are and what you are not. It's so linear. It's very difficult to encompass simultaneity of even opposite feelings in a discourse of identity. For example, while I politically tend to identify as a lesbian, saying I'm a lesbian doesn't tell you anything about anything. It doesn't speak to ways of relating in a specific cultural context. It doesn't tell you about my sexuality which is more complex than "lesbian" seems to imply. What I'm trying to say is the experience will exceed the label.

You mix several genres in *Brincando*—melodrama, documentary, archival footage—how does that reflect your thinking on identity issues?

The narrative form was a way of dealing with non-homogeneity of experience. You have soap opera conventions for certain scenes, such as the scene with the father when he confronts his daughter's sexuality and there's a fight. Then you have kind of a literary voice-over that's poetic and plays with image that comes from a different documentary tradition. You have all this archival footage that's used pretty traditionally except the story being told is very different. Then there is the contemporary gay and lesbian demonstration footage. Part of the reason I put it there was you never see that. In Puerto Rico, gay and straight, most people are not aware that there are Puerto Ricans who go in the street and demonstrate around these issues. In that sense, to a post-Act Up, Anglo film culture these kinds of demonstrations may seem passe. But in a context where they have never been seen to begin with, it's something else.

How does *Puerto Rican I.D.* express your ideas about representation?

In this last piece for *Signal to Noise*, a three-part series on ITVS, they wanted me to use some of the conventions I used in *Brincando* as a personal narrative, and there's a voiceover that guides you through three sections.

The first phase is seeing television as a child when I imitated American TV, using a lot of my home movies. I didn't see any difference between the white people I saw on TV and me because I shared the values of suburbia to a certain extent. I lived a relatively comfortable middle class existence, but simultaneously I identified with the more subversive programs. For me that meant the Addams family. I loved Jeannie's cousin in *I Dream of Jeannie*, who was bad as opposed to Jeannie who I thought was silly. At the same time I identified with the nice house, the nice car and so forth. In the *Brady Bunch*, for example, my identifications tended to be with the boys because they were more out there than the girls. I

also identified with the ideal family, the nuclear family. So the first part of this *Signal to Noise* piece deals with the ambiguities.

The second part deals with coming to the U.S. and learning that here I'm a person of color and what that means symbolically. It means the association with all these clichés of crime and danger, of excessive sexual behavior and so forth. At that phase, I thought all these things were oppressive. I was framed with stereotypes, and I took it on. I tried to fight it in its own terms.

The third section deals with how I look at and make television now as someone who grew up to be a filmmaker. How do I deal with trying to challenge some of those stereotypes? Instead of framing the discourse by responding to the stereotypes, I try to displace them with questions: What does it mean to be a slut? What does criminal mean? I try to reconstruct the discourse and give a visual alternative. Instead of trying to answer those stereotypes, I give the reality back with a difference so you can see how ridiculous they are.

For me, part of the discussion is about the limits of television. You sometimes lose the strategies of narrative to gain an audience or the means of production.

The process of making it yielded a lot more insights than those in the piece because of the conventions I had to deal with and conform to. I wasn't trying to invent myself as a subject. I wanted to show how the meaning of the images is constantly changing when the viewer's context changes.

So this work is another chapter in my process that

began with a realistic documentary, *AIDS in the Barrio*, then went to a community grassroots video, to an experimental deconstructive thing (*Brincando*), and then to this piece that is a dialogue with the public sphere. Each piece addressed questions in different ways.

You said you want your work to be commercially viable. Is that synonymous with mainstream?

I don't say commercially viable in the sense of making millions. Because my subjectivity as a Puerto Rican woman places me at the margins of American culture, for me being mainstream would require a number of transformations. What I mean by commercially viable is an enterprise that can reproduce itself without overdependence on the public sector since all the public sources are shrinking. You either stop being a filmmaker because you don't want to compromise or you keep being a filmmaker and you try to find the way you can work. It's a very impure and contradictory process. The same applies to exhibition: Who do you want to show your films? There are audiences that want to see certain kinds of media that are not being produced today because there's the perception that it won't make enormous amounts of money.



from *Brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican*

I see film—alternative or not—as fitting into a market structure. Even if you keep the process of experimentation, you address the question of how to make something pleasurable and insightful at the same time. If it's not consumed in a mass market, it's consumed by libraries, film schools and so forth. It's bought, it's consumed. Even work that was once perceived as radical is now a commodity. How can you pretend that alternative film is not inscribed for some kind of market?

What do you get from filmmaking as a means of expression?

I love it. I'm a production junky. To me filmmaking is a different way of knowing than writing, which is more open-ended, a way of recognizing the contradictions that are part of living. I write literature, fiction and poetry. I do what would be considered academic work, and I also make films. They are all very different ways for me to experience life. The biggest thrill is when I'm in front of an audience, and they engage in dialogue. When they tell me what they feel, what they saw, what they didn't like. They have insights that I don't have. It's that point of dialogue that makes it all worth it.

Interview by Elfrieda Abbe, first appeared in Angles, Volume 3, Number 2, 1997. © 1997 Elfrieda Abbe

Frances Negrón-Muntaner is an award-winning filmmaker, writer, and president of Polymorphous Pictures, based in Miami. The recipient of Pew, Ford, Truman, and Rockefeller fellowships, she holds an MFA from Temple University and a Ph.D. from Rutgers University. Best known for her award-winning narrative Brincando

el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican, Negrón-Muntaner is currently completing two documentaries, titled Constantly Chamorro: The Making of Guam, USA, and The State of the Territory: U.S.—Puerto Rican Relations at the Crossroads. Her latest book, Passing Memories: Puerto Ricans in American Culture, is forth-coming from New York University Press. A popular columnist, she writes for The San Juan Star, and is also the founder of Miami Light Project's Filmmakers Workshop, a program that seeks to promote independent filmmaking in South Florida. Negrón-Muntaner is a founding board member of the National Association of Latino Independent Producers.

Filmography

AIDS in the Barrio (1990). A documentary about attitudes concerning AIDS and an educational media tool.

Brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican (1994). A mix of fiction, archival footage, processed interviews and soap opera drama, *Brincando el charco* contemplates the notion of identity, class and race. The story of a light-skinned Puerto Rican photographer who is attempting to construct a sense of community in the United States.

Puerto Rican ID (1995). Reflects on living with American television as a Puerto Rican viewer and its effects on cultural identity.

History Mary Ellen Bute



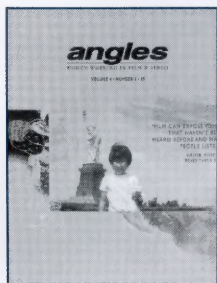
MARY ELLEN BUTE (1906-1983) was an American pioneer in abstract animation and played an important role in developing new experimental film techniques. Much of her work, often poetic abstractions set to music, is not known today because prints are not readily available. Perhaps her best known piece is *Passage from James Joyce's Finnigans Wake*, a live-action film that uses animation. She received a Cannes Film Festival prize in 1965 for the direction of a first feature film.

At 16, Bute left home in Houston and enrolled in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where she studied painting. Her early paintings reflect the influence of Expressionism and Cubism, showing her interest in light and movement.

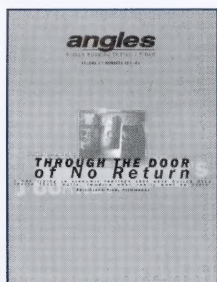
Her interest in finding ways of using light and color to create images with the order of music led her to work with electronic geniuses such as Thomas Wilfred and Leon Theremin to create a "color organ" that would enable her

to paint with light. She collaborated with filmmaker Lewis Jacobs and painter/mathematician Joseph Schillinger on *Synchronization* (1932), for which she created abstract drawings. With her husband, cinematographer Ted Nemeth, she made several abstract animated shorts.

In 1983, the Museum of Modern Art honored Bute with a Cineprobe program. —Excerpt from "Energy in Motion," Kit Basquin, Volume 3 Numbers 3& 4.



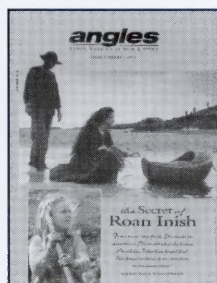
VOLUME 4, NUMBER 1. Interviews: Renee Tajima-Peña (*My America [... Honk if You Love Buddha]*), Ellen Bruno (*Sacrifice*), Cauleen Smith. Festivals: San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, San Francisco International Film Festival, San Francisco International Asian Film Festival, Mill Valley Film Festival, MadCat Women International Film Festival, Cine Acción: Festival Cine Latino. \$10.



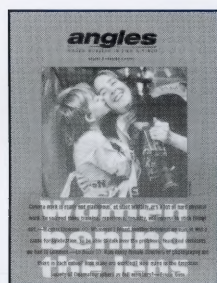
VOLUME 3, NUMBER 3&4. Interviews: Shirikiana Aina (*Through the Door of No Return*), Ingrid Sinclair (*Flame*). Articles: Composing soundtracks for documentaries. Behind the scenes with festival judges. Mary Ellen Bute: Pioneer experimental filmmaker. Reviews: New films from Women in Film, new lesbian films, *The Blinking Madonna*, *Stories No One Wants to Hear*, *Worthy Mothers*. Festivals: Toronto, Ann Arbor, Women in the Director's Chair. \$10.



VOLUME 3, NUMBER 2. Interviews: Frances Negrón Muntaner, (*Portrait of a Puerto Rican*), Maria Olivé Bellés (*Alicia Was Fainting*). Articles: An independent filmmaker looks at distribution. Films from Russian women. Festivals: Toronto International Film Festival, Women in the Director's Chair. \$10.



VOLUME 3, NUMBER 1. Interviews: Christine Choy (*Who Killed Vincent Chen?*) and producer Sarah Green (*The Secret of Roan Inish*). Postscript by film/video-maker Portia Cobb. Sold out. Reprints of articles available (\$5 each).



VOLUME 2, NUMBER 4. Interviews: Camerawomen Kelly Elder McGowen, Michelle Crenshaw, Estelle F. Kirsh; filmmakers Gurinda Chadha (*Bhaji on the Beach*) and Allie Light (*Dialogues With Madwomen*). Articles: Media activism, How to see more feminist work. Sold out. Reprints of articles available (\$5 each).



VOLUME 2, NUMBER 3. Interviews: Maria Luisa Bemberg, Marianne Eyde, Lita Stantic, Dana Rotberg, Guita Schyfter. Festivals: Festival Internacional Cine Latinoamericano (Cuba, 1993), Toronto International Film Festival (1993), Montreal World Film Festival (1993). Sold out. Reprints of articles available (\$5 each).

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VOLUME 2, NUMBER 2. Interviews: Maggie Greenwald (*The Ballad of Little Jo*), Canadian filmmaker Dorothy Todd Hénaut (*Firewords, Not a Love Story, Heartbeats*), Stacy Cochran (*My New Gun*). Festivals: Women in the Director's Chair (1993). Sold out. Reprints of articles available (\$5 each).

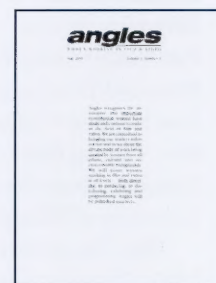
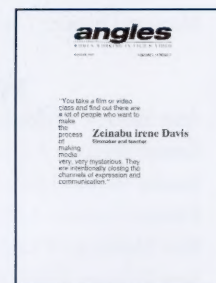
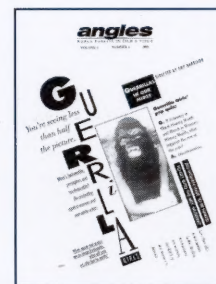
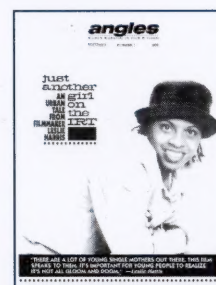
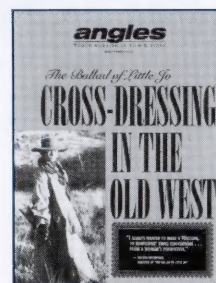
VOLUME 2, NUMBER 1. Interviews: Leslie Harris (*Just Another Girl on the IRT*), Clara Law (*Autumn Moon, Farewell China* and *The Reincarnation of the Golden Lotus*). \$10.

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 4. Interviews: Amy Harris (*Guerillas in Our Midst*), Rea Tajiri (*History and Memory: Akiko & Takashige*). Articles: Documentary filmmaking in Poland. Reviews: *Guerillas in our Midst*, and *History and Memory*. Sold out. Reprints of articles available (\$5 each).

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 3. Interviews: Cathy Cook (*The Match That Started My Fire, June Brides* and *Bust Up*), Mira Nair (*Mississippi Masala*) and Joy Rencher on her post-production company in L.A. Festivals: Slice of Life and the American Film Institute National Video Festival. Reviews: *You(r) Sex and Other Stuff*. Films from China. \$10.

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 2. Interviews: Zeinabu Irene Davis (*A Powerful Thang*), Nancy Kelly (*A Thousand Pieces of Gold*). Essay: "Alternative Visions," Dávida Mariá Benfield. Festivals: Toronto International Film Festival (1991), New York Film Festival (1991). \$10.

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 1. Interviews: Barbara Trent on the Academy Award-winning documentary, *The Panama Deception*, artist-exhibitor Janice Findley on alternative/independent film programming in Seattle. Essay by award-winning video-maker Jill Petzall. Festival: Montreal International Festival of Films and Videos by Women (1991). *Angles* mission statement on cover. Sold out. Reprints of articles available (\$5 each).



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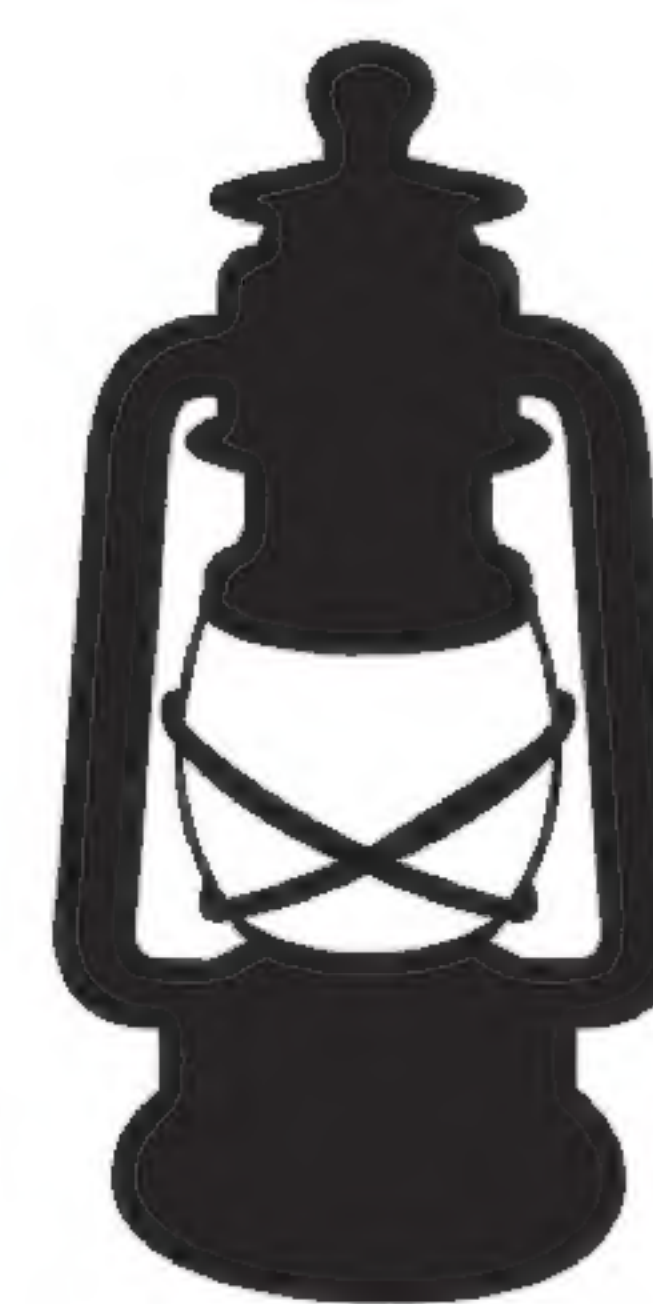


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